Mindfulness in Clinical Practice

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Abstract

Mindfulness has become increasingly popular in mental health and has been used in and alongside many different therapy modalities. Mindfulness is a good technique to use in clinical practice, because it helps people to calm their minds of continual incoming thoughts and focus attention where it is wanted. Mindful meditation is one technique used to center people’s minds as they observe and accept incoming thoughts, and gently push them away and refocus on breathing and awareness of the present moment (Müller, Gerasimova, & Ritter, 2016).

Mindfulness-based programs help people to increase their natural ability to be aware of their thought and feelings, and the environment around them. Mindfulness-based cognitive therapy and dialectical behavior therapy are two such programs that incorporate a lot of mindfulness techniques. An increased attention is one of the main benefits of mindfulness. Other benefits include stress management and emotion regulation due to people’s increased metacognitive awareness and increased flexibility in redirecting negative, ruminative thoughts onto more positive, productive matters. The benefits in people’s mental status from mindfulness can also lead to benefits in their overall health, such as better immune responses, cardiovascular functioning, and increased longevity (Pagnini, Bercovitz, & Langer, 2016). With more incorporation of mindfulness into clinical practice, people will see more long-lasting benefits on their mental and physical health.
Mindfulness in Clinical Practice

Mindfulness has become increasingly popular in clinical practice to treat with issues involving anxiety, depression, addiction, obsessive-compulsion, and many others. It is used in many different modalities of therapy, including mindfulness-based cognitive therapy and dialectal-behavior therapy. Therapy techniques with mindfulness have contributed to many mental and physical health benefits in patients as well as therapists. Mindfulness is a good method to use in clinical practice because it helps focus the mind on the present moment to relieve stress and calm the body. It also helps with staying focused and putting one’s attention where it is wanted.

Mindfulness is a state of awareness of one’s experiences in the present moment without judgment or attachment. One is aware of and practices a neutral acceptance of the full spectrum of emotions and thoughts within the self. From this moment-by-moment awareness, one is able to draw connections and find meaning in what is noticed (Davis & Hayes, 2011). Mindfulness is not something that is only acquired through training. Mindfulness is a natural ability that varies across circumstances and people, and can be experienced by anyone. These natural variations between people are likely due to differences in genetic susceptibility and environmental impacts (Hülsheger, Alberts, Feinholdt, & Lang, 2013). Through practice, this natural ability can be honed to better affect one’s daily functioning.

Mindfulness meditation is a form of meditation that is frequently used in mindfulness practices, and focuses on awareness rather than concentration. The main goal is to practice observing thoughts and feelings, and to cope with the potential uneasiness through acceptance and benevolence (Hülsheger et al., 2013). It is a comfortable state of relaxation, where one focuses on his or her breathing, physical sensations, and the environment around him or her.
Incoming thoughts and emotions are monitored without concentrating on any particular thought or emotion. One should be open to any thoughts or sensations that come to him or her, to accept them and observe them for a moment without opinion. After observing these wandering thoughts and sensations, one is supposed to redirect his or her attention back to breathing and environmental awareness (Müller, Gerasimova, & Ritter, 2016).

Mindfulness-based treatment programs have become increasingly popular. Clinical practitioners have incorporated mindfulness in the treatment of many different emotional and behavioral disorders (Hülsheger et al., 2013). Mindfulness-based interventions help to increase dispositional mindfulness, which is one’s natural habit of being mindful (Krishnakumar & Robinson, 2015). Both mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT) and dialectical-behavior therapy (DBT) incorporate a large amount of mindfulness in its program. MBCT is a newly developed program designed to avoid relapse of major depression. It incorporates mindfulness with features of cognitive-behavior therapy for depression. MBCT teaches patients to identify and separate from patterns of negative and ruminative thinking and to engage in new patterns of acceptance and living in the moment (Coelho, Canter, & Ernst, 2013). DBT incorporates more spiritual aspects, such as Zen and contemplative prayer. DBT encourages both the patient and the therapist to engage in mindfulness during the program. Patients practice mindfulness from an objective perspective, concentrating on one thing at a time, with an emphasis on productive behavior. Some mindfulness skills used to tolerate stressful situations are radical acceptance and mindful-breathing. Three specific skills worked on in DBT are observing patients’ thoughts and sensations in the present moment, describing factually what was observed, and participating wholeheartedly in the present moment without concern for judgment by others (Chapman, 2006).
Mindfulness has many benefits to one who practices it regularly. An example of such benefits is a more focused attention. Attention can be placed on a single object or thought, helping one to notice this class of objects or thoughts when they are brought into awareness again. Attention can be placed on bodily fluctuations in connection to thought processes to begin to distinguish what is real from what is in one’s head. Attention can also be placed on one’s own consciousness, helping one to realize when his or her mind is wandering. One can develop the ability to concentrate the scope of his or her attention as broad or narrow. One can vary the clarity of one’s attention on something to be more or less vivid depending upon the circumstance (Lutz, Jha, Dunne, & Saron, 2015). Mindfulness also enhances one’s attentional abilities through gains in working memory. One who practices mindfulness also tends to have greater continuous attention during performance assignments, and is better able to suppress distracting content (Davis & Hayes, 2011). With experience, focusing attention where it is wanted requires gradually less effort (Lutz et al., 2015).

Mindfulness has been shown to be significantly effective in stress management. The increased ability to transfer one’s thoughts from one thing to another helps one to avoid dwelling on unpleasant things, thereby reducing stress. Through mindfulness, one also is better at maintaining a neutral attitude for incoming thoughts or situations. A study found that students using mindfulness displayed significantly lower state anxiety than the control group and had a significantly higher heart rate variability during a cognitive experiment than the control group, indicating a better adaptability to stress (Shearer, Hunt, Chowdhury, & Nicol, 2016).

Mindfulness promotes metacognitive awareness through continual recognition and analysis of inner thoughts and feelings. It decreases rumination by redirecting thoughts onto more productive matters. Furthermore, as stated, it enhances attentional abilities through
continual refocusing and redirecting of thoughts. All of these cognitive benefits from mindfulness mediate successful emotion regulation strategies (Davis & Hayes, 2011).

Mindfulness also aids in cognitive flexibility, which is the “mental ability to switch between different concepts, to overcome fixed association patterns, and make new associations” (Müller et al., 2016, p. 278). Mindfulness increases self-observation, which helps create new automatic thought patterns and enables the individual to react in new integrated ways. These more adaptive responses to difficult situations result in a quicker recovery to baseline (Davis & Hayes, 2011).

Mindfulness can also benefit one’s overall health. Like internal locus of control, mindfulness can also be understood as a way of taking control of one’s awareness and reaction to the environment. It can be used to increase one’s perception of control, which is associated with many health benefits such as better immune responses, cardiovascular functioning, increased longevity, and physical strength. Higher levels of perceived control often lead one to perceive higher control over one’s health and will take more steps to maintain a healthy lifestyle. For example, one may eat healthier, exercise more, or have more regular doctor’s visits (Pagnini, Bercovitz, & Langer, 2016). A study assessing the effects of mindfulness-based stress reduction in adolescents found a significant increase in sleep quality as well as improved somatic symptoms (Biegel, Brown, Shapiro, & Schubert, 2009).

Mindfulness in clinical practice helps train patients to take their minds out of inner worries and negative thoughts and puts it back into the present moment. Many clinical practitioners are beginning to employ mindfulness in their therapy to improve both the mental and physical well-being of their patients. Such mental benefits include increased attention, stress management, emotion regulation, and cognitive flexibility. Oftentimes, these cognitive benefits
lead to such physical benefits as better immune responses, cardiovascular functioning, and longevity. Mindfulness techniques can be used by both the patient and therapist to calm the body and mind, and improve the effect of cognitively based therapy modalities.
References


