

Mindfulness Awareness in Psychotherapy

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Mindfulness Awareness Practice (MAP) is a useful adjunct in psychotherapy. Insight meditation, T'ia Chi, yoga, and the Relaxation Response are all MAPs. What these practices share in common is that the practitioner focuses attention on the breath, mantra, position, or movement with an attitude of non-judgment and acceptance (with loving kindness). I have been teaching insight meditation to clients when it seems relevant to the presenting problem and the client is motivated to learn this simple procedure. Clients with depression and self defeating thoughts, anxiety disorders (phobias, generalized anxiety, panic attacks), and stress disorders can often find timely relief from their suffering by practicing meditation and combining meditation with the more traditional psychotherapy.

Mindfulness is an attitude about living and experiencing life that we have imported from the over 2500 year Buddhist tradition and philosophy. It has become very popular in the psychotherapy field to utilize mindfulness practice. *Mindfulness* as a meditative practice cultivates the *mindful* attitude by stimulating or “firing” the neurons in the middle prefrontal cortex. This is the anatomical structure in the brain that is associated with awareness.

Mindfulness is a deceptively simple way of relating to experience. When we are being “mindful” we are able to be present in the moment in a non-judgmental or accepting manner. A “mindful” person is aware of his/her thoughts, feelings, behaviors, and emotions and participates fully in life. As you become more *mindful*, you are able to see more clearly and cease to engage in judging or self-critical thoughts. To be “present” is to allow oneself to be open and to respond to “what is” (not the way you want it to be or fear it to be). *Mindfulness* is the capacity to be free of historical assumptions that hijack our thoughts and emotions or conditioning which affects perception of experience. It is also about letting go about future and threatening possibilities or exigencies that deform our functioning in the present.

One can see how cultivating the attitude and capacity of mindfulness can be helpful in psychotherapy. An increased capacity for mindfulness, developed from practicing meditation, helps the individual take a step back from the experience and construct an alternative pathway of feeling and thinking. You are not so hardwired to the situation, reacting and feeling in knee-jerk fashion as if the situation is reality and not a momentary construction of it. You step back from auto-pilot mode of reactivity. According to Chris Germer:

When we are mindful, our attention is not entangled in the past
Or future, and we are not judging or rejecting what is occurring
At the moment. We are present. This kind of attention generates energy,
clear-headedness and joy (Insight Jour., Fall, 2004, 0p25).

Most clients can benefit from learning and practicing MAPs. In sessions, clients are oriented to mindfulness as an attitude towards experience in one session and taught the simple procedure in a second session. The specific ways meditation can help with the client's presenting problem is of course, emphasized. Reading material or references are suggested and an individual can become as involved in this 2,000 year practice and philosophy as their interest and motivation takes them.

Through the daily practice of meditation, the middle, prefrontal cortex is "exercised" and awareness and mindfulness cultivated. By aiming and sustaining focused attention on breath, for example, this capacity to direct attention and then be present in the NOW is developed. Meditation also helps increase our ability to remain in a calm, relaxed, yet alert state of mind which is contrary to how one feels when anxious or stressed out. Meditation provides a means of learning how to be aware of thought without identifying with them or making a particular negative thought THE reality. Negative thoughts that are associated with anxiety can be experienced by the mindful meditator as simply "passing through," as one would observe a river from the vantage point of the riverbank. The thoughts glide by, not grasped onto and made into the reality. Relapses into anxiety or depression are greatly minimized.

The research looking at outcomes associated with MAP have demonstrated decreased anxiety, improved immune function, better emotional regulation, enhanced empathy, increased feelings of happiness and contentment, decreased stress effects, and relapse prevention for depression. This research supports the potential benefits of adding meditation or other MAPs into a client's psychotherapeutic treatment.