

Mindfulness

A simple way of relating to our experience, which can have profound impact on painful, negative experiences we encounter.

Characteristics of mindfulness

Involves:

- 'Stopping'
- Paying attention
- Becoming aware of present moment realities
- Not judging whatever is happening as 'good' or 'bad'

Definition

"The non-judgemental observation of the ongoing stream of internal and external stimuli as they arise". Ruth Baer (2003)

"Keeping one's consciousness alive to the present reality" (Thich Nath Hanh, 1976)

"Mindfulness is simply the knack of noticing without comment whatever is happening in your present experience" Guy Claxton (1990), p.18

Relevance of Mindfulness Practice to Emotional Distress

- Creates a "holding environment"
- Mindfulness gives us a safe "platform" from which to observe
- Practice enables us to stay safely with distress until it disperses
- Mindfulness steadies and grounds us

Mindfulness in Psychotherapy

1. Awareness
2. Of present experience
3. With acceptance

All three components are required for a moment of full mindfulness. (Germer et al., 2005)

What Mindfulness is Not

- Not a relaxation exercise
- Not a way to avoid difficulty
- Not a way to by-pass personality problems
- Not about achieving a different state of mind

What Mindfulness is About

- Being present to our experience however distressing or upsetting it may be
- Brings us closer to difficulties but without becoming caught up in our reactions to difficulties
- It is a slow, gentle coming to grips with who we are
- Settling in to our current experience in a relaxed, alert, open-hearted way

Mindfulness in Action Techniques

These techniques are useful for bring mindfulness into the activities of everyday life. They also are a good place to start with clients who have very low impulse control and distress tolerance. Linehan (2003 pp170–171 & 174–175) describes a number of these techniques as a way of developing distress tolerance in her “Skills Training Manual for Treating Borderline Personality Disorder”

Mindfulness in action techniques include:

Focusing awareness of an aspect of a physical habit that previously has largely been outside of conscious awareness e.g.

- Noticing how tight you hold the steering wheel when driving.
- Being aware of what happens to your breathing or voice tone in an argument.

Focusing awareness on the breath when a specified environmental cue occurs. This technique has been described in detail by Thich Nhat Hanh (1991 pp22–30). The cues we might use include:

- Waiting for phone to be answered
- Waiting at a red traffic light
- Walking
- Listening to Music
- Getting Dressed

Detailed awareness of the mental phenomena associated with cravings or urges such as thoughts, physical sensations and feelings. This is different to urge surfing as this technique includes no expectation that the craving will be outlasted.

Source: <http://www.mindfulness.org.au/InAction.htm>

Informal Mindfulness Exercises

Mindfulness in Your Morning Routine

Pick an activity that constitutes part of your daily morning routine, such as brushing your teeth, shaving, or having a shower. When you do it, totally focus on what you are doing: the body movements, the taste, the touch, the smell, the sight, the sound etc.

For example, when you're in the shower, notice the sounds of the water as it sprays out of the nozzle, and as it hits your body as it gurgles down the hole. Notice the temperature of the water, and the feel of it in your hair, and on your shoulders, and running down our legs. Notice the smell of the soap and shampoo, and the feel of them against your skin. Notice the sight of the water droplets on the walls or shower screen, the water dripping down your body and the steam rising upwards. Notice the movements of your arms as you wash or scrub or shampoo.

When thoughts arise, acknowledge them, let them be, and bring your attention back to the shower. Again and again, your attention will wander. As soon as you realize this has happened, gently acknowledge it, note what distracted you, and bring your attention back to the shower.

Mindfulness of Domestic Chores

Pick an activity such as ironing clothes, washing dishes, vacuuming floors, and do it mindfully.

For example, when ironing clothes: notice the color and shape of the clothing, and the pattern made by the creases, and the new pattern as the creases disappear. Notice the hiss of the steam, the creak of the ironing board, the faint sound of the iron moving over the material. Notice the grip of your hand on the iron, and the movement of your arm and your shoulder.

If boredom or frustration arises, simply acknowledge it, and bring your attention back to the task at hand. When thoughts arise, acknowledge them, let them be, and bring your attention back to what you are doing.

Again and again, your attention will wander. As soon as you realize this has happened, gently acknowledge it, note what distracted you, and bring your attention back to your current activity.

Source: Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) Introductory Workshop Handout 2007.
Dr Russell Harris, M.B.B.S, M.A.C. Psych. Med.

Informal Mindfulness Exercises

Take Ten Breaths

1. Throughout the day, pause for a moment and take ten slow, deep breaths. Focus on breathing out as slowly as possible, until the lungs are completely empty, and breathing in using your diaphragm.
2. Notice the sensations of your lungs emptying and your ribcage falling as you breathe out. Notice the rising and falling of your abdomen.
3. Notice what thoughts are passing through your mind. Notice what feelings are passing through your body.
4. Observe those thoughts and feelings without judging them as good or bad, and without trying to change them, avoid them, or hold onto them. Simply observe them.
5. Notice what it's like to observe those thoughts and feelings with an attitude of acceptance.

Notice Five Things

This is a simple exercise to center yourself, and connect with your environment. Practice it throughout the day, especially any time you find yourself getting caught up in your thoughts and feelings.

1. Pause for a moment
2. Look around, and notice five things you can see.
3. Listen carefully, and notice five things you can hear.
4. Notice five things you can feel in contact with your body. (E.g. your watch against your wrist, your trousers against your legs, the air upon your face, your feet upon the floor, your back against the chair etc)

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Informal Mindfulness Exercises

Noting or Describing as a Mindfulness Skill

Noting or describing (ie silently putting words to your experience) can be a useful mindfulness skill.

This can be incorporated into any mindfulness exercise. Some clients find it very useful, particularly if they are often distracted by thoughts or feelings.

For instance, when feelings arise you can silently note 'feelings' (ie silently say the word 'feelings' in your mind). Or you could use a phrase like, 'it's a feeling'. Or you can be much more specific, and note each individual feeling by name, eg 'anger', 'boredom', 'calm'.

When thoughts arise, you can silently note 'thinking' (ie silently say the word 'thinking' in your mind). Or you could use a phrase like, 'it's a thought'. Or you can be much more specific, and note your thoughts by category, eg 'judging', 'worrying', 'analyzing', 'remembering', 'fantasizing'. Or more simply: 'anxious thought', 'sad thought', 'neutral thought'; 'thought about the future', 'thought about the past' etc.

A similar process can operate informally throughout the day. For example, in a tense work situation, you might observe a feeling of anxiety and simply note it as 'I'm feeling anxious' or 'I'm noticing a feeling of anxiety'.

Another simple option (my personal favorite) is to note 3 categories only: 'sensations' (ie stuff you can feel in your body), 'thoughts' (ie words you can hear in your head), 'images' (ie picture you can see in your head).

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Informal Mindfulness Exercises

The “Just Worrying” Labelling Technique

Before practicing this technique it is often helpful to differentiate worrying from constructive problem solving. Worrying involves repetitive circular thinking, which is associated with anxiety and produces no enactable practical outcomes.

This technique simply involves a person labelling worry as “just worrying” and then bringing their attention back to their breath or to simply change the subject of their thinking. Every time a person catches themselves worrying they just label it again and change the subject. It doesn't matter if a person does it 10 times in one minute or if they only realize they have been worrying after a period of 2 hours and then apply the technique. The important thing is that the person applies the technique when they realize they are worrying.

This technique involves no criticism or internal struggle, just simple non-judgemental labelling. **Therefore it is important in this regard that the client does not change the label from “just worrying” to “don't worry”.**

This technique is very powerful and most people find that their worrying thoughts dissipate almost totally within a few days. Then they usually start worrying about a week later because they have forgotten about the technique through lack of need to use it. At that point a reminder of the technique usually suffices.

The same technique can be applied to other disturbing repetitive mental events using labels such as “just doubting” or “just criticizing”. This is subtly but significantly different to avoidance. It is not running away from the aversive mental stimulus. Rather it is the non-judgemental labelling which is encapsulated in the word “just”.

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