

Description

Mindfulness Skills have emerged as an important focus of several empirically supported treatments. Dialectical Behavior Therapy for borderline personality disorder, mindfulness-based cognitive behavior therapy for depression, and mindfulness-based stress reduction are based in mindfulness. The roots of mindfulness practice are in the contemplative practices common to both eastern and western spiritual disciplines and to the emerging scientific knowledge about the benefits of “allowing” experiences rather than suppressing or avoiding them.

Mindfulness in its totality has to do with the quality of awareness that a person brings to everyday living; learning to control your mind, rather than letting your mind control you. Mindfulness as a practice directs your attention to only one thing, and that one thing is the moment you are living in. When you recognize the moment, what it looks like, feels like, tastes like, sounds like – you are being mindful. Further, mindfulness is the process of observing, describing, and participating in reality in a non-judgmental manner, in the moment and with effectiveness. At the same time, mindfulness is the window to acceptance, freedom, and wisdom.

Instruction

These are guidelines for leading mindfulness practice in a group setting. Leadership of the mindfulness practice should rotate from member to member. These instructions reflect just that; everyone gets a chance to lead the practice. The leader should receive nonjudgmental feedback and coaching about the exercise.

Beginning

The team leader asks a designated person, “Are you prepared to lead us in a mindfulness practice?” If the person answers, “yes”, the team proceeds. If not, the leader moves on to the next person, continuing until someone answers “yes”. The person leading the exercise is bell keeper as well, so the bell is passed to them at this moment. The team practices a nonjudgmental attitude toward anyone who is unprepared to lead. Why ask if the person is prepared? His or her preparation enhances the quality of the practice of every person on the team.

TELL A PERSONAL STORY

This anchors the exercise in the listener’s mind. Place the mindfulness exercise you’re leading in the context of your daily life. Telling a personal story evokes emotion, making it easier for the group to recall the specific practice.

Example: [A member of the team, Kate, used a recent trip she’d made to the Seattle aquarium as the backdrop to the mindfulness exercise she led.] Kate was walking through the aquarium, captivated by the bright green, yellow, blue, and orange of the tropical fish darting in and out of view. She noticed that she’d get really attached to certain fish, wanting to follow them around; she ignored others that weren’t as pleasing to her. Kate told us, “The fish are like my thoughts, coming and going, some more preferable to me than others. I hold on to certain thoughts and push others away. Observing my thoughts would be like stepping back from the aquarium glass, and allowing myself to simply notice each thought as it arises and disappears, without judgment, without attachment”. She then led a 5-minute practice on observing thoughts, using the aquarium as the metaphor.

MAKE THE EXERCISE SIMPLE (NOT TO BE CONFUSED WITH EASY).

In other words, pick ONE thing as the focus of your mindful attention. For instance, if you lead mindful breathing, you might suggest focusing on the rise and fall of the belly OR the sensation at the tip of the nose where the breath comes in OR the point in the back of the throat where the air is exhaled OR counting each breath. But, ask that each person pick ONE thing as his or her focus: This seems especially salient for beginners.

ANTICIPATE AND GIVE INSTRUCTIONS ON "WANDERING" ATTENTION

We like to refer to this as "what to do when you lose your mind". It's perfectly normal and expectable that the mind will wander off to something other than the focal point. For example, the mind may start craving that pastry on the table in front of you, or worry about paying that unexpectedly large credit card bill or detect an unbelievably intense urge to scratch the itch you've just noticed on the tip of your left nostril. Of course your mind does this and it's fine. Really fine. The practice is to catch your mind wandering and gently, gently, gently bring it back to the exercise. THAT is the practice! THAT is mindfulness! If you start judging yourself because your mind is wandering, notice your judging (without judging it) and bring your attention back. Likewise, if you're thinking what a wonderful person you are because you can really concentrate, notice your judgments (without judging) and bring your attention back to the practice.

ASK FOR FEEDBACK

After you have led the practice, you may find it helpful to hear nonjudgmental feedback, coaching, and reflection on your story, your bellkeeping, your instructions, etc. Remind the group to give you very specific behavioral instructions on something they would change. Our rule is to start with brief and genuine appreciative or complimentary feedback. Remember that one of the most effective ways to strengthen your skills is to strengthen your awareness of what you do well.

INCORPORATE THE COACHING ON THE SPOT

If you and your team have the time after feedback, you can practice your new improved version of your instructions, sounding the bell, or telling your story by giving you a little time for behavioral rehearsal. Remind your teammates of the fundamentals of shaping: END AT A HIGH POINT. They should praise you, allow you to stop, and smile at you warmly, the moment you improve your behavior.

INSTRUCTIONS FOR USING A MINDFULNESS BELL

The mindfulness bell serves as a cue for the practice. We advise you to use the bell for mindfulness only, avoiding use of it for bringing your team back to order. At retreat centers, the bell is *invited* to sound, not rung. Inviting the bell to sound, mindfully, marks the beginning and end of the formal exercise. These guidelines are an example of ones used at mindfulness retreats: Invite the bell to sound three times to start the practice, and three times to end it. As the bell sounds three times, slowly, mindfully, it gives your mind a few moments to settle down and ready itself for the practice. Likewise, inviting the bell at the end of the practice reminds you to bring yourself back to the present moment, as you move from mindfulness practice to team discussion. NOTE: Remember to orient new team members to the bell and it's purpose.