

Benefits of Mindfulness Training in Counselling and Psychotherapy

*Siew Kum Yew
Counsellor
Shan You Counselling Centre*

Although the roots of meditative practice can be found in many religious or spiritual traditions, it has been adapted in recent times to help people who are undergoing counselling and psychotherapy. In 1977, the American Psychiatric Association encouraged research to evaluate the effectiveness of mindfulness training in facilitating the therapeutic process. It can be an important tool in supporting change and increasing insight.

Benefits of Mindfulness Training

A growing body of research has supported the use of mindfulness training for a wide range of psychological problems. Scientific studies by psychologists and psychiatrists have shown that it can be effective in the treatment of depression relapse prevention, anxiety disorders, substance abuse disorders, and chronic pain. In addition, mindfulness training is a core element of several recently developed evidence-based therapeutic interventions. They include the Dialectic Behavior Therapy for borderline personality disorder, the Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy for depression, and Acceptance and Commitment Therapy. For the general population, mindfulness training has been associated with physical benefits like decreased heart rate, slowed respiration, lowered blood pressure, muscle relaxation, and improved brain and immune functioning, as well as psychological benefits like reduced anxiety and enhanced empathy.

The primary purpose of mindfulness training in counselling and psychotherapy is the cultivation of mindfulness. Mindfulness can be described as the moment-to-moment awareness of phenomena and experience, without the influence of distorted thinking, expectations, or desires. A second therapeutic purpose is the self-regulation of mental distress and emotional arousal through the development of a non-judgmental attitude and self-acceptance.

Two Basic Principles

Although there are many approaches to mindfulness training, two principles are basic. First, there is a focusing of attention to a simple meditative object, such as a sound, word (e.g., ‘love’), or phrase (e.g., ‘calm now’), a visual object, or a sensation (the most common being the breath). At the same time, the meditator adopts a passive and non-judgmental attitude, and becomes a neutral observer to his/her thoughts, accepting whatever they may be. He/she simply observes the thoughts, feelings, and sensations that arise and fade away in the mind, like passing clouds in the sky, without provoking a habitual psychological response. Thus, the meditator cultivates a neutral and accepting attitude to them, and learns not to judge or label them as positive or negative, or good or bad. When strong thoughts, feelings, or sensations arise, the meditator observes them until they subside, and then gently refocuses his/her attention back on the meditative object.

How does it work?

Dr Herbert Benson, a founder of the Mind Body Institute at Harvard Medical School, has shown in his groundbreaking research that with simple mindfulness training, people can elicit the Relaxation Response within themselves. The Relaxation Response is the direct opposite of our general response to stress, and is a scientifically measurable outcome that encompasses an increase in slow brain waves, and a decrease in the breathing rate, heart rate, blood pressure, and muscle tension. It leads to the more efficient functioning of the body's metabolism and immune system.

In addition, as the capacity to focus and be mindful increases, the meditator develops heightened awareness of his/her habitual and automatic mental patterns, and cultivates a more non-judgmental and neutral attitude to them. Thus, previously overwhelming thoughts, feelings, and sensations can now be seen as just a part of the continually changing field of mental perception. The therapeutic benefits of mindfulness training include a slowing down of cognitive processes, a more fluid relationship with mental habits and patterns, and a better regulation of extreme emotions.

It is easy to see how complementing traditional forms of counselling and psychotherapy with mindfulness training would enhance the therapeutic process. As the meditator develops greater awareness of his/her habitual and automatic mental patterns, the counselling sessions provide the platform to identify, challenge, and let go of maladaptive mental and behavioural patterns. At the same time, as new perceptions and insights emerge, the mindfulness practice provides the opportunity to observe and contemplate upon them. The cultivation of mindfulness supports an openness to new information, and helps to navigate reality without engaging in maladaptive cognitive processes. The mindfulness training can be practiced within or outside the counselling session, giving the client a greater sense of self-efficacy and freedom.

Mindfulness Training at Shan You Counselling Centre

As part of the Mind-Body Medicine (MBM) program at Shan You Counselling Centre, clients are taught the Two-Step Mindfulness Meditation technique as a simple and powerful way to elicit the Relaxation Response and cultivate greater mindfulness. This technique is particularly helpful in alleviating problems with anxiety, depression, and sleep due to excessively ruminations or worries.

Mind-Body Medicine is a holistic approach that uses the connections among the mind, body, and environment to prevent or manage health-related and/or psychological problems. It focuses on the powerful ways in which psychological, emotional, spiritual, social, and behavioural factors can directly influence mental and physical health. As eloquently espoused by the ancient Greek physician, Hippocrates, "the natural healing force within each one of us is the greatest force in getting well". Beside the Two-Step Mindfulness Meditation technique, other MBM intervention strategies available at Shan You Counselling Centre include breathing relaxation training, progressive muscle relaxation, guided imagery, and cognitive-behavioural therapy. For personal consultation on mindfulness training and other MBM techniques, please call us at **67419293** or visit us at **Blk 5 Upper Boon Keng Road #02-15 Singapore 380005**.

References

- Alterman, A. I., Koppenhaver, J. M., Mulholland, E., Ladden, L. J., & Baime, M. J. (2004). Pilot trial of effectiveness of mindfulness meditation for substance abuse patients. *Journal of Substance Use, 9*, 259-268.
- Davidson, R. J., Kabat-Zinn, J., Schumacher, J., Rosenkranz, M., Muller, D., Fantorelli, S. F., Urbanowski, F., Harrington, A., Bonus, K., & Sheridan, J. F. (2003). Alterations in brain and immune function produced by mindfulness meditation. *Psychosomatic Medicine, 65*, 564-570.
- Kabat-Zinn, J. (1982). An outpatient program in behavioral medicine for chronic pain patients based on the practice of mindfulness meditation: Theoretical considerations and preliminary results. *General Hospital Psychiatry, 4*, 33-47.
- La Torre, M. A. (2001). Meditation and psychotherapy: An effective combination. *Perspectives in Psychiatric Care, 37*, 103-105.
- Ma, S. H., & Teasdale, J. D. (2004). Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy for depression: Replication and exploration of differential relapse prevention effects. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 72*, 31-40.
- Perez-De-Albeniz, A. (2000). Meditation: Concepts, effects and uses in therapy. *International Journal of Psychotherapy, 5*, 49-58.
- Ramel, W., Goldin, P. R., Carmona, P. E., & McQuaid, J. R. (2004). The effects of mindfulness meditation on cognitive processes and affect in patients with past depression. *Cognitive Therapy and Research, 28*, 433-455.
- Stewart, T. M. (2004). Light on body image treatment: Acceptance through mindfulness. *Behavior Modification, 28*, 783-811.