



Mindfulness



Exercise



n/a



Client



Yes



Informal Mindfulness Practices

Although formal meditation can be a powerful way to cultivate mindfulness, it is important to note that meditation does not equal mindfulness. Irrespective of formal meditation experience, dispositional mindfulness levels appear to vary in the population (Brown & Ryan, 2003), and mindfulness can be practiced in many ways other than (formal) meditation.

Mindfulness can also be cultivated by what has been referred to as informal exercises: exercises that aim to enhance mindful awareness during everyday activities. They require a single focus of attention and the ability to gently turn back to the object of attention. The object of attention can be anything, ranging from a conversation with a colleague to eating lunch. Note that there are virtually endless examples of informal practices, which makes it impossible to list and describe them all. We have attempted to categorize the most important informal exercises and briefly explain them.

Goal

The goal of informal mindfulness practices is to cultivate mindfulness by making mindfulness a part of daily life. According to Thompson and Waltz (2007), “everyday mindfulness” can be described as a tendency to “maintain the open, accepting, present focus of attention during day-to-day life” (Thompson & Waltz, 2007, p. 1876). Hypothetically, mindfulness of everyday life activities may enhance human functioning in similar ways as more formal forms of mindfulness meditation because the underlying processes are virtually the same.



Advice

- A benefit of informal mindfulness practices is that they may be more accessible to a wider range of people. Still, for many people, meditation has a religious connotation. Informal mindfulness practices can be incorporated into any activity, from leisure pursuits to vocational responsibilities. For this reason, these practices are very suitable for clients who may have negative associations with formal mindfulness practices.
- For many clients, the best way to start with integrating mindfulness into their daily lives is by taking small steps. For instance, ask them to choose to apply mindfulness to one or two routine activities they do every day rather than all the activities described below.



- Evaluation of this tool is an important step. Ask your clients how it was to apply mindfulness in daily life. What did he/she notice? Are there any differences in terms of experience when they compare doing things mindfully versus their normal way of doing them?

References

- Hanley, A., Warner, A., Dehili, V., Canto, A., & Garland, E.L. (2015). Washing the dishes to wash the dishes: Brief instruction in an informal mindfulness practice. *Mindfulness*, 6, 1095-1103.
- Thompson, B. L., & Waltz, J. (2007). Everyday mindfulness and mindfulness meditation: overlapping constructs or not? *Personality and Individual Differences*, 43, 1875-1885.

Informal Mindfulness Practices

Instructions

Awareness of routine activities. Routine activities are activities performed regularly, often daily. Most routine activities require little conscious attention because they are highly automatized. Examples include taking a shower, driving or walking to the workplace, or eating lunch. The idea is to focus attention fully on the activity, observing the body movements, the sight, the sensations. When thoughts or other distractions emerge, one notices them and brings his/her attention back to the task at hand. For instance, when eating mindfully, one eats slowly, and attention is mainly directed at the experience in the present moment, which includes physical movements, the taste, and smell of the food, among others. Thus, rather than doing multiple things at the same time (such as reading while eating, talking on the phone while driving home, thinking about work while taking a shower), one adopts a single focus of attention. As part of mindfulness training programs, participants are encouraged to pick a few of these routine activities and to practice mindfully performing them. Since it is not time-consuming and involves activities that are performed daily, this exercise can easily be implemented into one's workday. Participants may pick activities such as being mindful while having lunch, being mindful while walking to the copy machine, or being mindful while driving home from work.

Body awareness. The awareness of the body that is cultivated through the body scan can be implemented in daily life by regularly paying attention to the body throughout the day in various circumstances. One can pay attention to the posture and become aware of physical sensations, such as pain or tension. Jobs requiring lifting, monotonous work tasks, uncomfortable work postures, repetitive movements, and prolonged periods at computer terminals are associated with physical problems, such as neck/back pain and occupational repetitive strain injuries (Aaras, Horgen, & Ro, 2000). Mindful awareness of these sensations is likely to enhance early detection and prevention of physical complaints. One can, for instance, implement daily moments of mindful awareness by setting the alarm at random intervals to disrupt repetitive movements or become aware of one's posture.

Awareness of impulsive and reactive patterns. Many daily patterns of thinking and behaviors are habitual (unconscious) reactions to experiences or events. Failing to perform well at work may immediately trigger negative, self-critical thoughts and judgments. The experience of sadness can result in a direct attempt to push away the unwanted feeling. Receiving a snide remark from a colleague may cause one to raise one's voice and say things that are regretted afterward. In all these examples, the behavior is guided by automatic patterns. Mindfulness requires awareness of these patterns as they arise during the day. While it may sometimes be difficult to become aware of these patterns before the onset of an impulsive reaction, becoming aware afterward can also be beneficial because it may enhance the detection of similar patterns in the future.

Awareness during social interaction. Practicing mindfulness in a social context involves using the interaction with the other person(s) as a single point of focus. Instead of multi-tasking during a conversation with a colleague or thinking about what to say next, attention is directed at the current conversation. In contrast to identifying with one's assumptions and reacting impulsively, mindfulness requires an open, non-judgmental attitude during the conversation characterized by deep listening, perspective-taking, and allowing the other



to respond. Moreover, mindfulness during social interaction can involve speaking with awareness. Examples include pausing before speaking, monitoring one's thoughts, and considering the effect of speaking them out loud. Most jobs require social interaction and regular communication with clients, colleagues, and supervisors. Practicing awareness during social interaction is, therefore, another exercise that can easily be implemented into one's everyday work life.