

Mindfulness in Psychodynamic Psychotherapy

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The single most effective tool in psychodynamic psychotherapy is the use of Mindfulness. Mindfulness involves turning one's attention inside to notice, from a curious and nonjudgmental point of view, the flow of one's internal experience. While a number of contemporary therapies have embraced mindfulness as a means of calming down emotional activation or reducing stress, it can also be used with dramatic results in psychodynamic psychotherapy.

Example: *For example, a client, Erin, was talking about how hard it was for her to be emotionally open. I noticed that her face, shoulders and upper chest were slowly turning red. When I commented on this she was surprised and said, "Yeah, it feels hot there, but I don't know what that is about!" I asked her to let the experience of the warmth be there and notice where it took her: "OK, so let yourself just linger with that feeling of heat. Feel it in your face and neck and upper chest. Really take your time so that you can notice the details of your experience, the thoughts, feelings, sensations, tensions, impulses, memories, images that might go along with this. Let me know what comes up." She remained silent for a few moments and then said, "I am ashamed. I remember a time when I was very open at school and told my friend how much I liked her. She looked at me with disgust. I never wanted to be open again" She bowed her head in shame. Simply by leading her more deeply into her experience and asking her to pay careful attention, a memory spontaneously occurred. Insight emerged from immersion in her present moment experience.*

In this example Mindfulness is used by client and therapist alike. By asking Erin to be aware of her experience and to stay with it, letting it unfold, I was asking her to be mindful. By noticing the details of what was happening with her in the present I was being mindful myself. Mindfulness for the client involves the turning of his or her attention inward without judgment or preference to notice the experience of the moment. Mindfulness on the part of the therapist involves turning one's attention outward towards the present moment experience of the client. It is a state of welcome, curiosity and wonder about the inner world. It does not involve forcing, thinking, figuring things out, trying to change one's experience, but just allowing it to be there and noticing how it changes. Without interference, and provided a safe environment, experiences have the same tendency to unfold as does a bud that knows how to become a flower. As therapists and clients we simply need to create a container in which that can happen. A plant needs sunlight, earth, water and safety from predators (and human beings with big shoes!). A client needs warmth,

attention, enthusiasm for their experience, acceptance, a sense of safety and connection with the therapist. In this context the psyche tends to reveal itself. It is a matter of inspiration. How can we as therapists create an atmosphere that inspires a client to explore inwardly?

Mindfulness is a primary tool that enables a direct connection between the client and her or his psyche.

History: Mindfulness is, of course, borrowed from Buddhism where it is used as a method of meditation to help people to develop an internal place deeper than identification with their momentary experiences. According to Dharma Teacher Will Kabat-Zinn, MFTI, mindfulness is used in Buddhism to explore what we are beneath our ideas and preconceptions about ourselves, a doorway to discovering who we truly are. Sustained mindfulness can lead increasingly to an internal freedom that is not dependent on any internal or external conditions. In psychodynamic psychotherapy we are more interested in resolving the experiences themselves. Both applications are beneficial.

In the 1980's Mindfulness was applied to the realm of psychotherapy by Ron Kurtz who went on to found Hakomi Experiential Psychology which is now taught internationally. He now refers to his approach as "Mindfulness Assisted Self Study".

In psychotherapy we use it to explore the details of one's experience "in vivo" instead of "in vitro". The essence of many therapies is an attempt to change the client's experience in relation to their self, the world and others – a rewiring of the neural networks deeper than cognitive insight can achieve. In psychoanalysis, the heart of therapy is experiential event - that is the exploration of the transference/countertransference relationship. It is not just the analysis and interpretation of this relationship that causes change; it is the actual felt experience. In Gestalt Therapy, one focuses on awareness of the moment. In Structural Therapy, Minuchin would encourage a couple to have a fight rather than talk about it. Neural patterns change throughout our lives as a result of new experiences. While talking about events can help clients unburden themselves and reduce the sense of aloneness around them, we need to generate new experiences for long-term change to occur. Mindfulness orients the client around the experience of the moment as an entryway to core models of their world.

When Jack left the office, stooping to avoid hitting his head on the doorframe, he shook my hand. A powerfully built man, his handshake offered me a set of limp fingers that stood in sharp contrast to his otherwise imposing physical structure. By paying attention to this little hologram of his presentation, and in a future

session repeating it in mindfulness, his whole relationship to power became crystal clear. As he shook my hand I asked him to carefully study what he did and did not do with his hand and the accompanying thoughts, feelings, images, memories, impulses, etc. He was instantly clear how he had decided never to use his power again after beating up Jonnie Smith in 6th grade. This decision, evident in his handshake, plagued his relationships ever since. By exploring the moment of the handshake carefully and slowly in mindfulness he was able to become aware of his relationship with power and begin to experiment with new beliefs and behaviors starting with me.

Assessment: Mindfulness can also be used for assessment. To assess what is happening in a client's internal world, one needs details before theories. From details hypothesis can be generated. Most of communication between client and therapist is not verbal. When a client comes in with a slow gait and sits down with a sigh, she is communicating to us, not in the language of words, which can be easily disguised, but in the language of experience. The unconscious speaks in many languages (Ron Kurtz in private conversation). It is important that we hear it. By noticing in any moment, not only the content of what is being said, but what the client is doing, how they are doing it and what, at any given moment they are experiencing, we add a dimension to therapy that results in a journey into the depths, not just of the neo-cortex, but into deeper parts of the brain where more fundamental issues are available.

There is a limit to the effectiveness of conversation in psychotherapy.

Mindfulness in Psychodynamic Interventions: How then is mindfulness actually used in therapy? Here is an example with a couple: Jon and Karen had a terrible fight that led them to therapy. She complained about him, "Whenever I want he says, 'No'. I ask him to go to lunch, he says 'No'. I ask him to go to the movies, he says no. I ask him to make love, he says no." I have had it!" While I could have reflected back the content of what she had just said, I reflected back her present experience, "That's really frustrating, huh?" Smart therapist that I am, I had a pretty good idea of what was going wrong here: she was probably asking in an alienating way. Following my own lead, I thought I would test my hypothesis. "So go ahead and ask him for something right now and lets see what happens".

One can obtain much more information from the present than the past.

Contrary to my idea, however she was sweet and inviting in her presentation. I still knew better, of course. I was sure that at home she was not on such good behavior. Then I looked at him. He said, "See, she is always trying to push me around!" Clearly he experienced her offer as coercion. My hypothesis was

wrong, but I had at least checked it out experientially instead of relying on my misplaced interpretation. Appropriately chastened, I asked them to repeat the interaction in mindfulness. “So, lets try that again, Karen, why don’t you just say one sentence again asking him to go out to a restaurant, and Jon, notice what ever comes up hearing her. There may be that feeling of being pushed, there may be images or memories, sensations in your body, anything even if its not linear. Let me know. Let her know when you are ready and she will say it to you again.” This time he studied his experience instead of just reacting. Mindfulness assisted self-study. He noticed that he was having images of all the people who had pushed him around in his life, from his parents to the Bible to the multinational corporations. He was fighting all of them. The good news was that when he refused to make love with her, it was not just her in bed with him, it was all the people whom he felt had controlled his life. By asking for mindfulness, much material became available that was not readily accessible in ordinary conversation.

Protocol: Here is a brief protocol for using mindfulness psychodynamically.

- The therapist must be aware of what is happening in the present in addition to content. This includes noticing the immediate actions of the client, her or his style of doing, and his or her moment-to-moment experience.
- It is also important for the therapist to notice the details of his or her own internal experience moment to moment (countertransference).
- The client can be asked to study any element of their experience in mindfulness by saying the following. It is best to select an element that is of interest to the client and in line with the theme of the session:
 - “Lets take a moment to really explore that. Would that be OK?”(Asking permission)
 - “Let your attention go inside so that you can notice the details of your experience.” (Orienting inwardly)
 - “Notice the thoughts, feelings, sensations, images, memories, tensions, relaxation, changes in breathing, impulses that occur as you pay attention.” (Providing a menu of possibilities frees clients from the usual limitation of looking for either thoughts or feelings. Internal experience is quite multidimensional. Stay away from emphasizing only feelings and thoughts.)
 - “Nothing has to happen”. (Take the pressure off. People generally try too hard. This interferes.)
 - Wait and wonder. (Your internal state is crucial here. It is important that you slow down you r internal pace. This can limbically affect your client who will follow you inside.)
 - It is also important that you are curious and enthusiastic about their experience. (While you do not need to put on a miniskirt and wave

pom-poms, your interest in what happens can be inspiring to them. If you try to be neutral, you de-humanize the relationship. I realize that is a controversial. You can test this out by trying to interact neutrally or with enthusiasm and warmth and note the results. Clients are tracking us like hawks, and are taking in tremendous amounts of information about us whether we try to be neutral or not.)

- Notice what you can tell about their new present moment experience from the outside and ask for a report as well.
- Connect with them on this level. By reflecting back, not just content, but their experience, you will deepen the relationship and the therapy exponentially. Examples of this might be, “You’re sad, huh?” “Everything just got still”, “You just tensed up a bit, huh?” Unless you want to engage the neocortex, keep your sentences short and simple.
- Ask them to stay with their experience and let it unfold to the next experience. For example, Jane was disconcerted that her excitement about buying a new car seemed clouded. As she stayed with her experience of excitement mixed with something else emotionally darker, what was unclear started to take form. By staying with the experience of the dark spot, she became clear that her European parents would have looked down on her choice of an American car. By then staying with the image of her parents’ disapproval, she began naturally to sympathetically feel their hardship as immigrants. Allowing herself to stay with this feeling led her to a sense of herself as being separate from their values and more connected to herself.

Conclusion: Through the use of mindfulness in psychodynamic psychotherapy a number of important therapeutic elements become immediately available. It encourages people to “act in “ instead of “acting out” Rather than take action based on internal events; they can take a step back to study them. Exponentially more information becomes available in mindfulness than in ordinary conversation.

Mindfulness Exercise: Try this mindfulness exercise applied to your internal organization as a psychotherapist: Take a moment to first let your attention go inside. Notice your present moment breathing, the sensations in your body, your thoughts, your feelings, hopes, impulses, memories, images, decisions, beliefs, songs, colors, anything that comes across your consciousness. Take your time doing this. Now imagine you are preparing for a client to come to your office. Notice how you start moving from Jane or John Doe, human being, to Jane or John Doe psychotherapist extraordinaire. Do you get more open, more formal, straighten your clothes, hide your grief, become more cognitive or emotional, more generous or more rigid? Watch this all as if you were watching an internal home movie in slow motion so that you can pick up even the subtlest of changes you

undergo. Notice your own way of becoming a therapist – what you like as well as what you do not like.

It is empowering for a client explore their own experience as opposed to relying on a therapist to explain what is happening inside. It helps people become more connected with themselves. It takes therapy to a new depth that goes beyond the cognitive into the experiential. The level of therapeutic impact is substantial. The difference between mindful exploration in therapy and conversation is the difference between wolfing down a Big Mac and fries while driving to your office vs. sitting comfortably in a French restaurant where you are served on small portion of a finely prepared dish. You sit and savor every morsel, noticing how the rosemary mixes with the garlic in the entree, and the particular confluence of raspberry and chocolate in the warm, fragrant desert. One simply notices more in this state. One notices the substrata of the psyche. (Analogy courtesy of Kathleen Dunbar, MFT.)

How would you like to conduct therapy?

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Summary: The single most effective tool in psychodynamic psychotherapy is the use of Mindfulness. Mindfulness involves turning one's attention inside to notice, from a curious and nonjudgmental point of view, the flow of one's internal experience. While a number of contemporary therapies have embraced mindfulness as a means of calming down emotional activation or reducing stress, it can also be used with dramatic results in psychodynamic psychotherapy. This article details the use of mindfulness in individual and couples therapy, present case examples, and provides a specific protocol for applying it to explore the contents and structures of clients' psyches.

