

# Benefits of mindfulness in counseling



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## **Abstract**

The practice of mindfulness is expanding through out the counseling setting (McWilliams, 2014). This practice is rather helpful in bringing great awareness and attentiveness to all areas of life to those participating (Christopher & Maris, 2010). That being said, mental health professionals could greatly help the lives of clients with the incorporation of mindfulness into their professional practice. Many counselors are presently experimenting and including mindfulness into their own daily routine, which allows them to better help clients undergo this well-suited practice (Rybak, 2012). Likewise, clients who practice mindfulness can learn what they should be placing their attention on and how to quickly recover from upsets (Rybak, 2012). Clients can obtain a great counseling experience and overall health from receiving expert support and encouragement from their counselor as they learn to bring mindfulness to an everyday practice (Rybak, 2013). Thus, clients benefit from both members of the counseling relationship practicing mindfulness (Rybak, 2013).

*Keywords:* mindfulness, awareness, attentiveness, attention, and practice

According to Christopher and Maris, “ mindfulness is a type of awareness that entails being fully conscious of present-moment experience and attending to thoughts, emotions, and sensations as they arise with out judgment and equanimity” (2010, par. 4). The regular practice of mindfulness progresses an individual toward desirable and overpowering awareness (Christopher & Maris, 2010). Today, mindfulness is growing now that many have seen more of what this Buddhist-inspired practice has to

offer those in different settings (Christopher & Maris, 2010). Jon Kabat-Zin is a large reason for the growth of mindfulness in modern time because of his studies conducted in the late part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Christopher & Maris, 2010). Numerous recent studies have found mindfulness to be successful in helping those who practice to achieve a greater status of health (Hawley et al., 2014; Christopher & Maris, 2010). Since counseling professions seek to assist individuals in all aspects of health, it may be helpful and progressive for counselors to bring mindfulness into the counseling session (Rybak, 2013). The practice of mindfulness by both members of the counseling relationship can greatly benefit the clients counseling experience and overall health (Rybak, 2013).

According to McWilliams (2014), the practice of mindfulness has been around for quite some time. Followers of Buddhism have been practicing mindfulness as a large part of their religion long before any modern day clinician has brought it into practice (McWilliams, 2014). The Buddhist practice of mindfulness began when the Buddha avoided the belief of a God and chose to focus more on the growing self (McWilliams, 2014). Mindfulness has currently been on the up rise since other cultures have become more open and accepting of this rather helpful practice (McWilliams, 2014). Today, there are a variety of Buddhist inspired exercises and techniques that are being pulled and used in a clinical and medical setting (McWilliams, 2014). Since mindfulness grew out of Buddhism, there is extensive research on this unique religion and the techniques that have just recently been put in the spotlight (McWilliams, 2014).

There are many ways to apply mindfulness, but two common ways are through Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction Therapy and Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (Hawley et al., 2014). According to Lao, Kissane, and Meadows, “ both are 8-week group programs designed to teach mindfulness skills through formal sitting meditation and other mindfulness exercises” (2016, par. 5). Mindfulness can be practiced by taking part in specific applications such as those stated above, or by incorporating simple mindfulness-based techniques and exercises (Hawley et al., 2014). Regardless of the application, mindfulness is meant to bring overall improvement to the lives of those partaking in the practice (Hawley et al., 2014). Hawley et al. clarifies that it is still uncertain what mindfulness specifically does to the brain to bring about such improvements (2014). A study conducted by Hawley et al. founded that mindfulness may have the significant ability to stop excessive thinking (2014). In doing so, mindfulness becomes a type of prevention from certain mental illnesses and continuous negative cognitions (Hawley et al., 2014). It is imperative for all who seek vast improvements through the practice of mindfulness to have a consistent and daily practice (Hawley et al., 2014).

Counselors are now beginning to incorporate mindfulness within their own repertoire because of the strong certainty most have gained for the use of this practice (Brown et al., 2013). According to Brown et al., “ the current body of mindfulness literature suggests that integrating this seemingly simple approach into counseling yields consistently positive outcomes with clients” (2013, par. 3). Beginners have been known to assume that mindfulness is an avoidance of problems, but this is simply not the case

(Brown et al., 2013). Using mindfulness, one has the ability to focus on what occurs in the mind from an object stance (Brown et al., 2013). This objective viewpoint can be rather helpful to a client undergoing exploration in counseling (Brown et al., 2013). The first step that a counselor can take when looking to incorporate mindfulness into their practice is by conducting research and learning about the subject at hand (Brown et al., 2013). Many counselors beginning mindfulness-based practices often work with clients on simple techniques that allow the client to easily practice in and outside of the office (Brown et al., 2013). For example, there are many basic meditation, breathing, and body scan exercises that can be taught in counseling and practiced outside of the session by the client (Brown et al., 2013). In order to achieve all benefits that mindfulness has to offer, it is imperative for the client to practice the learned techniques on a regular basis (Brown et al., 2013). Mindfulness can become relatively natural with time and practice (Brown et al., 2013).

Another way for counselors to learn the abundance that mindfulness has to offer is through their own practice of the craft (Rybak, 2012). Professional counselors, similar to any other individual, will gain the common positive outcomes expected through with their own practice of mindfulness (Rybak, 2012). Counselors who consistently practice and achieve mindfulness can significantly help clients reach the same state of awareness and objectivity (Rybak, 2012). Through their personal knowledge, counselors can assist clients with any struggles or blocks that are commonly experienced in the mindfulness process if they themselves have practiced and grown using mindfulness (Rybak, 2012). It is helpful for the client to have an

advantageous, well-rounded, and experienced counselor who can share knowledgeable instructions and tips on mindfulness-based practices (Rybak, 2012).

Shomaker and Ricard conducted a six-week study to see if counseling graduate students would benefit from practicing mindfulness, and their results were rather significant and helpful in this ongoing worldwide investigation (2015). Upon examination, this study uncovered more captivating support for future and current counselors to practice or gain experience in some type of mindfulness (2015). These two researchers found that students in graduate counseling programs who practice mindfulness “ were 1.58 times more likely to enhance their attunement with clients during the semester than comparison-group CITs” (Shomaker & Ricard, 2015, par. 29 ). Counselors who start their own journey of mindfulness practice can bring great harmony to the counseling relationship, which could ultimately help the client reach success in therapy (Shomaker & Ricard, 2015).

Synchronization allows for greater collaboration between the two parties of the counseling relationship when working toward achieving the goals of therapy for the client (Shomaker & Ricard, 2015). Thus, the results of this investigation suggest that mindfulness can help the counseling relationships connection, which will greatly guide a client’s ability to obtain success in therapy (Schomaker & Ricard, 2015).

As well, Christopher and Maris (2010) conducted qualitative research on a class specifically undergoing mindfulness practice in a graduate counseling program. Christopher, who was trained in applying MBSR, specifically taught this class over the course of the semester using his experience and

knowledge (Christopher & Maris, 2010). It was found that students had an extreme increase in all aspects of health while in this mindfulness-based class (Christopher & Maris, 2010). From the increase in overall health, the counseling student had achieved a form of self-care that many continued on after the class had ended (Christopher & Maris, 2010). After many students in Christopher and Maris's research began actually seeing real clients, the majority continued mindfulness in their practice and found it to be helpful (Christopher & Maris, 2010). Many students who partook in this mindfulness-based class disclosed that they are now using mindfulness in their profession to enhance their focus onto the client in session (Christopher & Maris, 2010). According to Christopher and Maris, "the students reported developing greater skill at helping their clients to more fully experience themselves in the moment, to notice their current reality, and to notice the habit patterns that create suffering for them" (2010). That is, counselors who practice mindfulness have an adept ability to assist their clients in achieving a great sense of knowledge and awareness (Christopher & Maris, 2010).

The practice of mindfulness by both parties of the counseling relationship benefits the health of the client (Christopher & Maris, 2010, Rybak, 2012; Shomaker & Ricard, 2015). According to Rybak (2012), most want and look to achieve good health. This overall health that many strive toward can be achieved through both the process of counseling and the use of mindfulness (Rybak, 2012). Clients attending therapy often struggle to cope with difficult situations, circumstances, or life changes (Rybak, 2012). According to Rybak, "Both the common and less common forms of stress experienced in life often challenge a person's sense of wellbeing as attention is drawn to

particular aspects and away from others” (2012). In other words, stress often takes an individual away from the importance of living and focusing up-to-the-minute (Rybak, 2012). The constant practice of mindfulness can help clients focus on what is needed in the existing moment of time, ultimately improving overall health by discontinuing focus on negativity that is not crucial to be looked at (Rybak, 2012)

Mindfulness is known to bring strength during difficult situations to those practicing (Rybak, 2012). Of course, a client in counseling is bound to have times of trials and tribulations (Rybak, 2012). As stated by Rybak, “Mindfulness based training and skill development contribute to social and emotional resiliency” (2012, par. 27). Clients who practice mindfulness are able to quickly get back up when life pushes them down (Rybak, 2012). That is, clients prevent placing all focus on the negative and are able to skillfully concentrate on the current moment (Rybak, 2012). This allows clients to avoid fixating on what has already caused or may be presently causing a setback (Rybak, 2012). Clients working with mindfulness can see current life difficulties with objectivity and address them with more poise (Rybak, 2012). Being in full control of awareness and focus brings a client the great capacity to ‘bounce back’ from defeats (Rybak, 2012).

Any form of negative dwelling can be diverted when clients practice mindfulness (Rybak, 2012). For instance, a client practicing mindfulness that recently underwent a major life upset has a great ability to quickly recover (Rybak, 2012). Clients are taught many skills through mindfulness that allows them to choose what they would like to put their full attention on (Rybak, 2012). Rather than experiencing a long period of uncontrollable



emotions toward what has already occurred in the past, an individual is able to focus objectively on the present and current moment in time (Rybak, 2012). Continuing the practice of mindfulness allows a client to keep their “optimal level of mental health” even after experiencing a distressing period of time (Rybak, 2012).

It may be of concern for a Christian counselor to incorporate Buddhist derived practices for the sake of their Christian client (Frederick & White, 2015; McWilliams, 2014). A common type of mindfulness practice through meditation for clients and counselors of Christian faith is Christian Devotion Meditation (Frederick & White, 2015). According to Frederick and White (2015), this form of meditation is similar to others but has a large focus on seeking God. Christian Devotion Meditation puts more of an emphasis on God, religion, and spirituality when meditating and finding peace (Frederick & White, 2015). Comparable to other mindfulness meditation techniques, Christian Devotion Meditation has like outcomes but are said to occur through and because of the conscious acknowledgment and growth toward God (Frederick & White, 2015). A variety of studies show that Christian Devotion Meditation has quite a positive impact on the health of Christian followers (Frederick & White, 2015).

As stated before, mindfulness brings about a great ability for the practicing individual to be fully and objectively aware of all internal cognitions and external surroundings (Christopher & Maris, 2010). Clients who learn the practice of mindfulness are able to objectively see circumstances, which can lead to possible changes in overall thinking (Christopher & Maris, 2010). More hospitals and counseling settings are using mindfulness practices

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because of the great evidence signifying that mindfulness can be helpful to suffering individuals (Hawley et al., 2014; Brown, 2013). Mental health professionals may greatly benefit from using mindfulness in practice. Many counselors today are practicing mindfulness as well as teaching clients mindfulness-based techniques through personal knowledge and experience (Brown, et al., 2013). The counselors own practice and teaching of mindfulness are both done in part to better help the client and their overall life (Brown et al., 2013; Christopher & Maris, 2010; Hawley et al., 2014; Rybak, 2012; Shomaker & Ricard, 2015). Lastly, the abundance of research and studies show that the practice of mindfulness by both members of the counseling relationship can positively impact the clients counseling experience and general being (Rybak, 2013).

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