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Mindfulness and Psychotherapy

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Mindfulness is a way of paying attention that can be enhanced through meditation. Having been practiced for over 2,500 years as a means of alleviating suffering, it is more and more coming to the attention of medical and mental health professionals as well as the mainstream popular culture. A recent conference offered by Harvard Medical School Continuing Education (Spring 2006) entitled *Mindfulness and Psychotherapy* featuring presentations by Jon Kabat-Zinn, Mark Epstein, and others attracted well over 700 medical and mental health practitioners. During the conference, Christopher Germer reported that a study done three years ago found that ten million people in the United States alone were meditating. Objective evidence from brain scans (Davidson, et al., 2003; Davidson, 2003; Lazar, et al., 2005) as well as research on the development of Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) for relapse prevention in the treatment of depression (Segal, Williams, and Teasdale, 2002), treatment for generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) and panic disorder diagnoses (Roemer and Oreille, 2003), dialectical behavior therapy (DBT) for borderline personality disorder, (Linehan, 1993), treatment for obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) (Schwartz, 1996), prostate cancer intervention (Saxe, et al., 2001) and skin clearing for psoriasis (Kabat-Zinn, et al., 1998) indicate that mindfulness has enormous potential for enhancing mental and physical health. Case studies reported at the conference indicated that the use of mindfulness within the psychotherapy setting is seen to enhance openness, authenticity, and genuine curiosity about one's experience which in turn is seen to enhance self monitoring as clients become aware of bodily sensations, thoughts, and feelings associated with their particular issues, including depression, anxiety, guilt, and fear. Both the objective and subjective evidence presented at the conference

generated excitement and substantive discussion among presenters and participants.

What is Mindfulness?

While mindfulness cannot be reduced to words, Jon Kabat-Zinn, (2003), offers the following definition: "...the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment and non-judgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment" (p.145). In addition, while ideas about mindfulness are interesting and stimulating, mindfulness itself is not about ideas; nor is it a relaxation technique. It is the process of awareness itself. Its interest lies in how to be most practically and fully aware of the present moment. As a practice, it comes out of the Buddhist tradition. Seemingly simple, mindfulness is a skill that needs to be acquired and practiced. Both formal and informal practice is important in order to cultivate mindfulness. Formal practice helps one to experience the nature of the mind in the laboratory of meditation. This is sometimes referred to as "bare attention" (Epstein, 1995). In a recent article, Walsh and Shapiro (2006) reviewed 40 years of meditation research in order to examine the positive psychological and somatic effects of formal meditation. Informal practice brings moment to moment attention to whatever is happening in the present as one actively engages in one's life. Continued practice opens one to becoming more sensitive to a greater range of sensory and internal experiences. Through practice, one begins to accept one's thoughts and reactions, is able to make space for them without identifying with them, and if one becomes lost in thought or reactions, sees that non-judgmentally. This leads to a genuine interest in each moment whether experiencing the mind all over the place or the mind in stillness. This promotes a natural courage and patience where one can know one's own insecurity as insecurity, fear as fear or anxiety as anxiety. In sum, mindfulness, over time, allows one to experience one's life more directly. With mindfulness the shift is from the content of experience to the process of experiencing, letting the content be just as it is, whatever it is, thoughts as thoughts, feelings as feelings, sensations as sensations, and the experiencing of none of these as one's person.

Mindfulness and Psychotherapy

There is much commonality between mindfulness and psychotherapy. They seem made for each other. The goal of both is to be present. Already built into the psychotherapeutic process by its nature is an implicit commitment, on the part of the participant and the therapist, to pay a certain kind and quality of attention. If the quality of the therapy relationship is essential to successful treatment, which is what the research indicates, then the value of strengthening mindfulness or attention on the part of the therapist and the client is obvious. Good therapists are highly skilled in the use of attention and all the clinical literature emphasizes the importance of attentional expertise (Speeth, 1982). Research strongly indicates that mindfulness practices significantly strengthen attention. The practice of mindfulness is a continual process of remembering to be mindful, to be present. When one realizes one has wandered from the present moment, one brings one's attention back. This process occurs over and over again. Working in the present moment one can begin to ask oneself if one's perceptions are really accurate; if they reflect reality or are based on inaccurate judgments, interpretations or habituation. With mindfulness one attempts to strengthen the capacity to turn toward what is happening no matter what it is. In therapy, it is frequently discovered that the psyche's solution (or turning away from) a problem often causes even more suffering than the original challenge itself. Similarly, mindfulness' perspective is that suffering, as distinct from the inevitability of pain, results from a kind of contraction of one's experience of self occurring as one turns away from moment-to-moment awareness. Also, what the therapist turns away from in the encounter with the client often indicates salient content. It is in individual moments of presence to what is the "moment of meeting," (Stern, 2004), including the turning away, that movement forward and growth most often take place in therapy. Mindfulness expands receptivity to the present moment in which the interpersonal connection or disconnection is occurring.

In the articles that follow the application of mindfulness to psychotherapy is explored from a number of different angles. Dr. Don Morgan, Director of the Psychological Clinic at Rutgers Graduate School of Applied and Professional Psychology, explores how mindfulness and other teachings from the Theravada, Tibetan, and

Zen traditions are currently enriching psychotherapy. In the second paper, Dr. Irwin Badin, Director of the Institute for Psychoanalysis and Psychotherapy of New Jersey, grounded in the notion that a therapist, regardless of orientation, can never escape his own subjectivity, discusses how a therapist does best when open to and aware of who he is in each shifting moment. In the final paper, writing as Director of the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction Center of New Jersey, I share insights both as a therapist and as someone who has received teacher training at the University of Massachusetts Medical School in Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) and who has taught Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction to my own clients and to clients specifically referred for MBSR training while continuing psychotherapy with their own therapist. In a following issue, four additional perspectives will be offered.

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