



Using Mindfulness for Self-Care

Mindfulness can be used by counsellors to support their self-care, helping (Fletcher, Pond and Gardiner, 2022; Pollak, Pedulla and Siegel, 2014):

- reduce stress
- increase resilience
- develop capacity to be psychologically present
- enhance ability to offer the core conditions
- transition from one client to another
- move from counselling to other activities.

What Mindfulness Is

The term 'mindfulness' may be used to refer both to mindful awareness and to practices to help you foster this – in other words, mindfulness practices are what you do to cultivate mindful awareness.

Mindful awareness has been described as 'paying attention to what's happening in the present moment in the mind, body and external environment, with an attitude of curiosity and kindness' (Hyland, 2015, p.6) and 'knowing directly what is going on inside and outside ourselves, moment by moment ... to see the present moment clearly' (Williams, 2018, 'What is mindfulness?' section).

How Mindfulness Helps

Mindfulness can make a huge difference to:

- becoming less bothered by (and gaining perspective on) the stresses going on in your mind or around you
- being more able to focus on what matters most to you and acting on that by unhooking from what might otherwise hijack your attention and negatively influence your actions.

Mindfulness Practices

Most mindfulness practices involve:

- choosing a physical sensation to focus your attention on – the ‘focusing anchor’
- noticing when your attention wanders away from this focusing anchor, hooked by something else
- choosing to deliberately unhook your attention from whatever hooked it and to return it to your chosen focusing anchor
- returning to noticing when your attention has been hooked, and then being able to practise unhooking your attention once again.

Thus, mindfulness practice could then be referred to as ‘unhooking practice’. Mindful awareness is about being able to recognise what’s hooking your attention and then making choices about what you then actually focus on. This also includes practising unhooking from the self-criticism and low self-worth that are often influencing how people relate to themselves, moment-to-moment in the background.

There are many types of mindfulness practices, and different ones may suit you at different times and in different places. Even if you are new to the formal concept of mindfulness, you may well already be doing some mindfulness practices, for example grounding practices.

Mindfulness practice: an example

Mindful sipping is a grounding mindfulness practice in three parts. Get a drink, a then follow these steps:

- ✓ *Sitting* – notice what you can physically sense before you sip: three sights, two sounds, contact points with floor and chair, how the drink container feels as you hold it, and then what else you notice about the drink container.
- ✓ *Sipping* – notice changing physical sensations as you take a slow, deliberate sip and (at some point) swallow. Taste? Temperature? Texture?
- ✓ *Savouring* – notice the physical sensations that linger after the sip – at some point, repeat, starting again at sitting.

Each time that you notice your attention has moved away from what you are choosing to physically sense (getting hooked), just notice this has happened and then return your attention to what you are physically sensing in an easy-going way (unhooking). Adapt in any way and stop at any point that feels right for you.

Other mindfulness practices

Almost any activity or sensation can be a focus for this kind of practice:

- Identify one or more physical sensations involved in the activity – these sensations are now the focusing anchor.
- Focus on these sensations, noticing when your attention has become hooked.
- Unhook from the hook and refocus back on the chosen sensations.
- Only do as much as you want to do at the start – don't force yourself to do more.

In-Session Mindfulness Practice

As a counsellor, you can use mindfulness practices in a counselling session: it's a socially acceptable way to briefly pause, refocus and re-engage, helping you steady yourself and be in psychological contact with your client. The choice of anchor and form of practice is restricted to what fits with being engaged with your client – that is, physical sensations that can serve as a focus for mindfulness practice while still enabling you to look at your client and listen to their words.

Sipping may be one option – and other common examples include the feeling of feet on floor or sitting bones on your chair, breath moving in your body, or contact in your hands. You may like to choose one to ‘test-drive’ and cultivate in situations when you are with people in everyday life. In this way, you are building the skill of being able to re-engage with embodied presence with your client when your attention gets hooked away.

Choosing a Focusing Anchor

The role of a chosen focusing anchor is to create contrast between your chosen focus and whatever might hook your attention. This makes it easier to spot when your attention has been hooked. As thoughts are common hooks, focusing anchors based on physical senses make for the greatest contrast. Different types of anchor suit different situations.

Focusing anchors should be neutral or pleasant – avoid choosing unpleasant or painful sensations. A vivid focusing anchor is best – it makes it easier to spot when you’ve been hooked and makes unhooking easier, with a clearer focus point to return to. A vague focusing anchor, in contrast, makes it harder to spot when you’ve been hooked. It can also be an uphill struggle to find and return to when strongly hooked.

Different people find different sensory anchors helpful. Anchor possibilities include:

- a sound you can hear
- something you can see (perhaps with eyes still or tracing its edges)
- an object you can feel with your hands
- the feeling of contact in the soles of your feet or sitting bones
- the feeling of your body moving with your breath at your nostrils, in your belly or in your back
- the sensations of changing movement as you do something (e.g. showering, chores or walking)
- a mixture of sensations linked to what you are focusing on (e.g. the look and feel of an object being held).

Coping with Becoming Hooked

It is important not to feel that becoming hooked is somehow a failure: mindfulness practice depends on your attention getting repeatedly hooked so you can practise the skills of hook-spotting and then unhooking. These skills are what makes cultivating mindful awareness relevant in your life.

‘Sneaky’ mental hooks can be hard to spot. For example, you may notice the thought: ‘I’m useless at mindfulness as I can’t stay focused’ or ‘My mind is too busy’. However, spotting this particular hook and then unhooking from it is being mindful, whatever your mind says! Another sneaky mental hook might be the thought: ‘I’m doing this wrong as I don’t feel relaxed.’ Remember that mindfulness practice is often not easy, and that effective skills-building practice can feel effortful at times when the hooks come fast and strong. As with physical exercise, the benefits come after frequent practice. The more frequently you do a mindfulness practice in a given context, the more you build your skills of hook-spotting, unhooking and refocusing.

Other Contexts for Mindfulness Practices

As well as using mindfulness practices during counselling sessions, you can also use them:

- between sessions – to help let go of the impressions from the previous client, so as to be more engaged with the next client. Here, there is a wider choice of anchors, with more practice options.
- outside your counselling work – to help become more engaged with whatever you are doing.

In these contexts, more choices of anchors and forms of practice exist. Examples might include mindful walking/moving and the three-stage pause.

The three-stage pause

The three-stage pause can help identify ‘sticking points’ – i.e. what feels unfinished or preoccupying from a previous session that is hooking your attention, and what happens when you practise unhooking from this. The exercise can take from 30 seconds to five minutes – or longer – and you choose what is the most helpful anchor in a given situation.

The three stages of this practice are as follows:

- *Check-in (hook-spotting)*: what is hooking your attention in your surroundings, in your body physically and inwardly – mentally and emotionally? Notice these hooks and allow them to be in the background.
- *Unhooking practice*: choose a focusing anchor, and practise focusing, spotting when hooked, unhooking and refocusing. Are there any ‘sneaky’ hooks that are telling you it should be different from how it is?
- *Check-out (broad sensory awareness)*: notice what you can physically sense, sense by sense, then some senses together, e.g. noticing sounds, then sights, then contact points – then multiple senses of sitting in the chair, listening to sounds, and feeling your breath move in your body.

You can end the practice here (perhaps by moving, stretching and/or yawning) or else do further cycles of three stages before then finishing.

Above all, remember that you are the best person to decide what types of mindfulness practice suit you best. So experiment and be creative!

References

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