

Chapter 2

An Overview of Mindfulness and Its Implications for Children and Adolescents

Srinivasan Venkatesan

All India Institute of Speech and Hearing, India

ABSTRACT

Mindfulness is focusing on the present moment while calmly acknowledging and accepting one's thoughts, feelings, and body sensations as they are. The use of mindfulness practices on children and adolescents is burgeoning. This chapter covers the meaning and elements of mindfulness, their measurement, the various techniques, and exercises exclusive for children. Such techniques are typically individualized, tailor-made, personalized, contextualized, play-based, activity-oriented, reward-oriented, and maintained at the child's developmental level. Mindfulness parenting is vital. A mindful parent is aware of one's thoughts and feelings; is responsive to the child's needs, thoughts, and feelings; is better at regulating own emotions; is less critical of oneself or the child; is better at standing back from situations and avoiding an impulsive reaction. Issues related to professionalism, formal institutions for training mindfulness, and ongoing research on this theme, their achievements, and setbacks are listed before providing future directions for work in this area.

INTRODUCTION

Mindfulness is to be fully present, being aware of what or where we are, and how we are feeling or doing. By doing so, one is likely to become reflective. Thereby, we do not become overly reactive or feel overwhelmed by what is going on around us. This act of self-awareness does not happen all of a sudden. It develops in shades and grades over the years in any given individual. Infants and toddlers are the least mindful. Children, not too far away from the animal temperament, share most of their qualities. Can we conclude that animals and young children are indeed more mindful than adult human beings? Not so. Most animals and young children are instinctual. They do not reflect on or about themselves. They only

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react. They do not experience the deeper aspects of mindfulness. A mindful human can choose how to react entirely on the present. Animals cannot and do not decide what they do. They cannot visualize the future. Their time frame is of that instant.

DEFINITION

There is no single universally accepted meaning or definition of mindfulness. The term is further confused with many other distinct but inter-related words (Box 1). According to Phillip Moffitt, mindfulness is “relaxed, embodied awareness.” For Jon Kabat-Zinn, the founder of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), it is defined as “paying attention on purpose in the present moment, non-judgmentally.” It is “a non-elaborative, non-judgmental, present-centered awareness in which each thought, feeling, or sensation that arises in the attentional field is acknowledged and accepted as it is.” In the field of clinical psychology, mindfulness is operationally defined based on a two-component model with each component defined in terms of specific behaviors, experiential manifestations, and implicated psychological processes (Bishop et al. 2004). Mindfulness has three different aspects that operate together seamlessly to bring about a state of awareness. They are intention, attention, and attitude.

Box 1. Glossary on key terms related to mindfulness

Reflection is serious thought or consideration. Generally used in the context of therapy, psychologists typically “reflect” back the client’s words to hear what they have said. It helps them to evaluate the logic or reasoning behind is said. Human self-reflection is one’s capacity to introspect and the willingness to learn more about oneself. A model of reflection involves (i) description of what happened; (ii) noting what you were thinking and feeling; (iii) evaluating what is right and wrong about the experience; (iv) analysis of what sense you can make of the situation; (v) conclusion on what else could have been done; and, (v) action plan of what would be done if it arose again.

Contemplation refers to psychological insights or visions present in the practice of religion. It is how one can intelligently approach and understand human life-experience. The objective of contemplation is the totality of human existence or human experience.

Prayer is a deep inward state undertaken in quiet solitude. Outside stimuli are reduced. A special kind of monotonous soothing environment is created. Echoing intonation of ritual words and phrases like an “OM” are chanted repeatedly. Additional effects may be achieved by use of incense sticks, rolling beads (rudraksha), candle or lamp lights, the sound of bells, a special posture held for a long time, complete or partial closing of eyes, as well as floral offerings. In prayer, a person calls upon a deity in some manner. There is praise or thanksgiving, seeking forgiveness, consolation, or assistance based on one’s relationship with the divine being. Prayer cannot be equated with meditation. They cannot be separated too. The two states are closely related. Prayer is to focus on intercession, confession, and praise.

Meditation is a spiritual practice. It is recognized as a form of alternative medicine to provide mental clarity and physical relaxation. It can be used regularly for personal growth and reduce stress, pain, fears, and anxiety. Most religions prescribe meditative practices. There are many types of meditation, such as mindfulness meditation, Kundalini yoga, Zen meditation, movement/yogic meditation, transcendental meditation, Mantra meditation, Vipassana meditation, and others. Not all types of meditation are right for everyone. Each type of meditation requires different skills and mindsets.

HISTORY

The notion of mindfulness takes its roots in ancient Buddhist tradition from India. Siddarth Gautam Buddha (500 BC) offers four layers of mindfulness practice of the body, emotions, mind, and the objects of mind. Each layer is the foundation for well-being and happiness. Others propose layers of mindfulness as a focus on the present, concentration, and awareness. A classification of five layers covers conscious, subconscious, supramental, subliminal, and subtle causal. Are the layers of mindfulness linear? No. It is just like riding a bike. We learn the different layers in steps and use all of them together. Although a

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