

How to Help Your Patients Overcome Anxiety with Mindfulness

How Mindfulness is Especially Effective with Anxiety

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Dr. Siegel: Once we work with our client or patient to see the role of avoidance in their anxiety disorder and to see the costs of that, perhaps they have a little bit of motivation or a little bit more motivation to want to shift toward a mindfulness-oriented approach.

A mindfulness-oriented approach is going to involve, instead of finding ways to not feel anxious, finding ways to increase our capacity to *be with* and experience anxiety as a passing phenomena.

It's also going to involved beginning to learn how to step out of the thought stream. That doesn't mean blocking, suppressing, or stopping thoughts, but it does mean training our attention to be able to pay attention to something other than the narratives passing through our minds.

Now, many of you, I'm hoping at this point, are somewhat familiar with mindfulness practices. If you're not, let me suggest a resource for you: check out my website, which is www.mindfulness-solution.com.

One of the things that's very important in using mindfulness practices in psychotherapy is for the therapist to already have some personal experience of these practices and to really have a sense of how doing mindfulness practices affects the mind and the body.

"Mindfulness is awareness of present experience with acceptance."

If we don't have a good reference for that in ourselves, it's going to be hard for us to understand how to optimally guide our patient or client in working with their own mindfulness practice.

Mindfulness is awareness of present experience with *acceptance*.

Mindfulness practices are techniques or exercises that we engage in, in order to cultivate mindfulness.

When we do these practices and begin to cultivate mindfulness, we learn how to stay with the moment-to-moment kaleidoscope of sensations, images, thoughts and emotions that are arising and passing in consciousness continually.

"When we begin to cultivate mindfulness, we learn how to stay with the moment-to-moment kaleidoscope of sensations, images, thoughts, and emotions."

There are two parts of mindfulness practices that are particularly important for working with anxiety.

One of them is that, by stepping out of the thought stream – by regularly redirecting our attention to bodily sensations, to the sensations of the sights and sounds of the natural world around us, to the changing emotional landscape inside, to noticing things such as our attraction to certain experiences and our aversion from experiences, and to noticing the rising and passing of impulses – all of these interoceptive and sensory attunements that happen with mindfulness practice are going to be very helpful in working our way out of our anxiety disorders or helping our patients to work their way out of *their* anxiety disorders.

So many anxiety disorders, of course, have to do with thinking. They have to do with worrying about the future or they have to do with avoiding – with trying not to feel things.

“If we are able to train the mind to be able to *not* identify so much with thought, we are much less likely to get trapped in an anxiety disorder.”

If we are able to train the mind to be able to *not* identify so much with thought and be able to be with this kaleidoscope of sensory experience, we are much less likely to get trapped in an anxiety disorder.

Now, when a patient takes up mindfulness practice, particularly if they take up a form that has a lot of interior focus such as sitting and following the breath, oftentimes they get quite alarmed.

What happens is as we begin to attune to what’s happening, we become even more aware of tension in the body, more aware of how busy the mind is – what in Buddhist circles is called “monkey mind,” where it feels as though there’s a monkey inside of our heads going from window to window to window, jumping around frenetically.

Seeing this amount of agitation, seeing this amount of unrest in the mind often is hard for folks and it leads them to stop and they say, “This isn’t for me – I’m not a mindfulness person.”

It’s important when introducing these practices to folks, number one, to help them to understand that they’re likely to experience more vividly just how scattered and frisky the mind is, rather than to feel calm at the very beginning.

The other thing that’s helpful is to start with an exercise which isn’t too challenging, and we’ll talk about what some of those are shortly.

It's very important to normalize the experience of craziness that comes up when we start to pay attention to what the mind is doing moment to moment.

We want to help people to be kind to themselves – to be compassionate with themselves – to help them relax the tendency to condemn themselves, thinking, “Gosh, I’m such a bad meditator. I’m so crazy. I’m so anxious. I’ll never be able to do this well.”

Sometimes people start these practices and because they are, often for the first time, beginning to bring their attention out of the thought stream and into the present moment, they start to get a calming effect, and they may take to this effect.

In other words, they can feel like, “Ah! Finally I’ve found a natural benzodiazepine, a way to feel at peace, a way to feel less conflicted and less agitated.”

And that’s fine, if that’s how it begins—but we don’t want folks to get hooked on that because, again, our ultimate goal here isn’t so much figuring out how to get calm – it’s not about stress reduction.

Mindfulness practice is about increasing the capacity to *be with* anxiety so that we don’t get trapped in an anxiety disorder.

So, what are good practices to start with if somebody is very anxious?

“Mindfulness practice is not about stress reduction; it’s about increasing the capacity to *be with* anxiety.”

Oftentimes, when we’re anxious, we’ll pace. We see people pacing outside of the waiting area if their loved one is in surgery; we see people pacing when waiting for other kinds of information that could be emotionally upsetting.

Since we’ll often pace when we’re anxious – we do that because it’s anxiolytic – it discharges a little bit of the tension in the gross muscles of the body.

So, one possibility for starting practice with somebody who’s very anxious is to do walking meditation.

Again, if you’re not familiar with that, I direct you to *The Mindfulness Solution* website, www.mindfulness-solution.com – it gives you an audio tape that you can follow for learning walking meditation.

Other forms of informal practice are also quite useful.

By *informal practice*, we mean practices that can be done in the course of daily life. There's eating meditation: to simply decide to have a meal silently and to bring the attention to the taste of the meal.

To eat slowly enough to be able to actually taste the food is another nice way to begin for somebody who is struggling with a lot of anxiety.

There's listening meditation: to simply sit quietly. In other words, without a lot of activity, we can attune to the sounds around us.

One of the nice things about listening meditation is that when we're listening, it feels as though we are not particularly active in the process; it feels like a receptive practice – to listen – as opposed to walking, which feels much more like we're doing it. Even breathing can feel, if you're anxious, as though you're controlling the breath.

A listening meditation helps to cultivate this attitude of receptivity – and, again, you can get instructions for the listening meditation at the *Mindfulness Solution* website.

Now, however we begin, chances are a highly anxious person is going to start feeling anxiety before long in whatever form of mindfulness practice they are doing.

“A highly anxious person is going to start feeling anxiety in whatever form of mindfulness practice

Here it can be helpful to have certain phrases just to create a sense of containment or holding for the experience.

One nice one is simply descriptive to say, “This is fear. Fear feels like this,” or, “Fear's not permanent,” or even, “Fear is not me.”

What's important is to use those phrases – again, not to stop the anxiety, but to contextualize it so that we can *hold* the anxiety as a mother holds a child or, as D.W. Winnicott talked about, *having a holding environment* in psychotherapy.

By doing this, we learn to *be with* the experience rather than identify with the experience.

Let me suggest now an exercise, and this is adapted from the *Mindfulness and Acceptance Workbook* by Forsythe and Eifert that will be in your resources.¹

They call this *Leaves on a Stream*, and it's a very nice little visualization exercise that can help people to begin the process of mindfully *being with* the whole kaleidoscope of inner experiences that arise.

It goes like this, and I suggest doing it with the eyes closed.

First, instruct your client to adopt an alert and dignified posture – sitting in a chair or sitting on a meditation cushion. A nice instruction is to suggest a string tied to the top of the head, gently elongating the spine, allowing us to sit up straight in an alert, but also in a relaxed way – not a rigidly straight spine, but simply an awakened spine.

With the eyes closed, you can spend just a few moments following the sensations of the breath.

Whenever you give instructions, particularly to anxious folks, about a breath meditation, it's important to say that this is not a breathing exercise. We're not trying to control the breath in any way. We're not trying to regulate it – this isn't diaphragmatic breathing.

But rather we are simply using the breath initially as a sensory experience that we can attune to and use as something to be aware of with acceptance in the present moment.

Once a person has been with their breath for just a few minutes – and you don't want to extend that out very far because that becomes difficult for anxious folks – suggest to them that they imagine that they are sitting next to a stream on a lovely autumn day, and, as often happens on autumn streams, leaves are beginning to drift down.

These leaves come in many different forms: they come in different shapes and in different sizes; some are red, some are yellow, some are brown – the full autumn experience.

Then suggest that, as you sit and follow these leaves, imagine that a thought or a feeling that arises and you can take this thought or feeling and simply place it on a leaf and watch it float away.

Wait until you see that leaf receding in the distance, and then take another thought or feeling, the next one that comes along, and place it on a new leaf, and allow it to recede into the distance.

Just continue to do the same with each thought, feeling, or perhaps impulse or image that arises in the mind.

Allow a person to do that for, maybe 10 or 15 minutes – we don't want to do it too long with somebody who's new to these kinds of activities.

“Use the breath as a sensory experience that we can attune to and use as something to be aware of with acceptance in the present moment.”

We just want to get into this idea that, “What I’m going to do is allow inner process to unfold as it will. I’m not trying to control it. I’m not trying to stop it. I’m letting it go and beginning to get the experience of stepping-out-of-the-thought-stream by simply being an observer of the thought stream rather than identifying with it or participating with it.”

After doing that for a while, you can suggest opening the eyes with the intention of accepting whatever arises in the rest of the day.

1. Eifert, G. H. & Forsyth J. P. (2008). *The mindfulness and acceptance workbook for anxiety: A guide to breaking free from anxiety, phobias, and worrying using acceptance and commitment therapy*. New Harbinger Publications.