Mindfulness and spirituality: Implications for healthy relationships

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INTRODUCTION

Mindfulness is becoming increasingly popular in the practice of psychotherapy to treat a wide range of physical, mental and emotional ailments; the possible benefits it has to offer the field of marriage and family therapy necessitate investigation. Thus far, the majority of practice and research on mindfulness focuses on individual training in a group context (Baer, 2003; Brown, et al, 2007) and there is a lack of literature outlining the integration of mindfulness into work with couples and families. Recently, interest in the role of mindfulness in intimate relationships has grown, and early research is promising. Most research on mindfulness has not examined its correlations with spirituality, but where it has been studied, significant relationships have been found (Schure, et al., 2008, Shapiro, et al., 1998, and Carson, et al., 2004). The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate the potential value of integrating mindfulness into marriage and family therapy practice and training.

SPIRITUAL CONTEXT

While most mindfulness training is secular, many programs, including mindfulness based stress reduction (MBSR), are based on Buddhist philosophy and principles (Kabat-Zinn, 2003).

Marsha Linehan, the founder of dialectical behavioral therapy (DBT), has a background in Christian contemplative prayer, and drew on her experiences living in a Catholic monastery to develop her theory (Van Nuys, 2007).

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Islamic tradition’s ecstatic Sufist poets including Rumi, Hafiz, and Kabir have long been recognized for their eloquent writings about awareness, acceptance, and contemplation.

WHAT IS MINDFULNESS?

- Mindfulness is “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally” (Kabat-Zinn, 1994, p. 4)

- When one is mindful, he/she is training in paying attention to thoughts, emotions, and sensations, instead of automatically reacting to them. The more we train in this way, the more we realize the fleeting nature of things, and the easier they are to accept. After we can accept these experiences, we have a choice in how to respond to them.

   acceptance  mindfulness  awareness  choice

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Increases in mindfulness have been linked to:
- Higher relationship satisfaction (Barnes, Brown, Krusemark, Campbell, & Rogge, 2007; Burpee & Langer, 2005; Carson, Carson, Gill, & Baucom, 2004)
- Increased empathy and compassion, specifically perspective-taking and empathic concern (Block-Lerner, Adair, Plumb, Rhatigan, & Orsillo, 2007; Wachs & Cordova, 2007)
- More skilful responses to intense emotions (Dumas, 2005; Wach & Cordova, 2007)
- Less reactivity in interpersonal relationships, resulting in more positive relational dynamics (Wachs & Cordova, 2007)
- Negative correlations with both attachment anxiety and avoidant attachment (Shaver, Lavy, Saron, & Mikulincer, 2007)
- Increased spirituality, as found through quantitative and qualitative methods (Carson et al., 2004; Schure, Christopher, & McGeorge, 2007; Shapiro, et al., 1998)

CONCLUSION

One possible reason that mindfulness is such an effective intervention is because it promotes spirituality. There is strong evidence that clinicians, faculty, and students of marriage and family therapy feel that spirituality is integral to mental health, is relevant to clinical work, and that it should be integrated more thoroughly into therapist training (Carlson et al., 2002; Grams, Carlson, & McGeorge, 2007; Haug, 1998). Mindfulness could be a useful way to develop spiritual dimensions in clients and give a vehicle for therapists to integrate spirituality into therapeutic work without discussing specific religious doctrine. It would, therefore, be advantageous for further investigation into the incorporation of mindfulness into therapist training.