Overview of Mindfulness Practice and Utility in Substance Abuse

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Abstract
Substance abuse continues to take a major toll on the health of individuals, families and communities nationwide. In 2005, an estimated 22 million Americans struggled with drug and alcohol problems. Estimates of the total overall costs of substance abuse exceed 600 billion annually. Even though early treatments for addiction were sometimes effective, the vulnerability to relapse was shown to be high after treatment. Reducing the rate of relapse is a big challenge in the treatment of substance abuse patients. The cognitive behavioral therapy model has shown that lack of appropriate skills and dysfunctional belief when encountering stressful or high risk situations result in relapse. Recent controlled studies on mindfulness of other forms of psychopathology raise the possibility that similar benefits may be raised for substance abuse disorders. Can mindfulness be effective when added to the substance abuse treatment?

Introduction
Mindfulness involves a non-eloquent, 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.

Through mindfulness meditation one brings an attitude of acceptance to the inevitable distractions that occurs when one sits still. Even when experiencing an unpleasant emotion or distracting thought, one can observe or experience the mind without avoidance.

The potential benefit of mindfulness for treating addictive behavior has been recognized and continue to be studied. Mindfulness seeks to enhance tolerance to triggers such as negative affect. In contrast to the traditional cognitive therapy, mindfulness approach would seek to change the way one approaches a situation rather than to change the thought itself. The addition of mindfulness practice into existing treatments, the risk of relapse is expected to decrease.

Therapies
- Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT): increase willingness for unwanted reaction to difficulties and reducing emotional avoidance.
- Dialectical behavior therapy (DBT): has been recently applied in substance abuse treatment. Learning new strategies to modulate the reactivity, intensity, and duration of responses.
- Substance abuse patients with strong urges are encouraged to observe these urges or accept the pain associated with withdrawal.
- Mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT): intensive training in mindfulness practice used to prevent depression relapse.
- Mindfulness-based relapse prevention (MBRP): intended to raise awareness of triggers, monitor internal reactions, and foster more skillful behavioral choices. The practices focus on increasing acceptance and tolerance of positive and negative physical, emotional, and cognitive states, such as craving, thereby decreasing the need to alleviate associated discomfort by engaging in substance abuse.

How to practice mindfulness?
- Sit quietly, with a straight spine (tonguing about may tempt you to fall asleep).
- Close your eyes.
- Make it your intention to be in this moment and to be open to what comes up, without judging your experience.
- Bring your attention to your breath and simply notice as you slowly inhale and exhale. You’re not trying to make anything happen but just to observe what is naturally taking place.

How to practice mindfulness? Cont.
- If your mind begins to wander, as it inevitably will, simply notice this and gently bring your attention back to your breath. No need to judge your thoughts, as this tends to be like struggling in quicksand—you’ll just sink more quickly. Awareness and acceptance of your thoughts is paradoxically the key to detaching from them rather than identifying with them as reality.
- Try five minutes at first, and build up to 20 minutes a day or so. If possible. However, it’s better to practice mindfulness for only a few minutes a day than not at all.

Conclusion
- The practical support on the integration of mindfulness into the treatment of a range of disorders is still in its early stages. Several studies showed mindfulness to be beneficial with different disorders. More trials are needed to provide evidence for the level of contribution of mindfulness.
- All therapy models that include mindfulness appear to have consensus that awareness of the present moment and acceptance of it are important aspects of mindfulness meditation.
- It has been confirmed that negative affect triggers relapse in substance abuse patients. Users seek drugs to temporarily escape from reality and avoid these negative emotions. Studies of drug craving suggest that active attempts to suppress substance related thoughts leads to paradoxical rebound effect of increased drug-related thoughts and memory activation.
- Nevertheless, more mindfulness-based studies are needed to confirm the effectiveness and the potential patient population that can benefit the most.

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References