

Compassionate Mindfulness Therapy: Spirituality and Mental Training

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Abstract

The need for new interventions that can aid in the recovering of patients with physical and emotional disorders has led to the increase of clinical evaluations of contextual therapies in diverse health scenarios. Controlled trials have demonstrated that mindfulness interventions improve outcomes in health areas like chronic pain, depression, anxiety, and quality of life among many others. Mindfulness practice has proven to be helpful in the deconditioning of habitual behavioral, cognitive, and emotional response patterns, as well as an effective tool for emotional and attention regulation. The compassion element helps the practitioner to not distort its perception of reality, allowing the understanding of others perspective as well as a new outlook of reality.

In reascent times, both mindfulness and compassionate based therapies have been wildly used with very good results. The purpose of this work is to review the components of compassionate mindfulness therapy and refer some of its effects on both physical and mental health. This analysis ends with a reflection of the future of compassionate mindfulness research.

Keywords: Mindfulness; Compassion; Components

Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) are the most widely used psychological interventions for emotional disorders in the world. However, a recent systematic review and meta-analysis aimed to identify factors associated with an increased risk of relapse and recurrence (RR) after CBT for depression reported a mean 33.4% RR [1]. New interventions have been developed with the purpose of assisting those for whom this type of therapy has not worked, as well as to increase the long-term effect maintenance of the results.

For more than two decades now, third generation cognitive-behavioral or contextual therapies have proven to be effective in the treatment of various physical and psychological symptoms. There has been a dramatic increase in randomized controlled trials that have demonstrated that mindfulness interventions improve outcomes in multiple areas like chronic pain, depression relapse and addiction [2].

Mindfulness-based therapies are focused on intentionally attending one's experience, moment to moment, with acceptance and without judgment (Kabat-Zinn, 2005), by training the mind through meditation, people can identify the transience of their thoughts, sensations, and emotions, thus preventing them from getting hooked on negative behavioral patterns.

In the study of mindfulness, confusion has been generated around the concept of meditation, since some professionals in the mental health area mistake it with terms and concepts such as: introspection, reflection, thought, analysis, relaxation, guided imagery, diaphragmatic breathing, and progressive relaxation. Meditation is an uncritical state of self-observation in which any cognitive, sensory, emo-

tional, physiological, or behavioral content is passively noted without engaging in it. Through contemplation, it is possible to observe the flow of mental events without seeking to change them and without formulating value judgments [3] and helps to decondition habitual behavioral, cognitive, and emotional response patterns. Effective emotional and attention regulation has been reported with the continuous practice of mindfulness [4]. The regular practice of this technique may inhibit secondary habitual processing by cutting the habitual chain of thought-action. In addition, this practice can help in the modification of the cultural conditioning and learning processes of the individual's social frame of reference that conditions its perception [5].

At the neurological level, the practice of mindfulness has important neuroplastic effects such as the increase in gray matter in the brain areas involved in learning, memory, attention, and emotion regulation. It improves both intra and inter hemispheric brain connectivity and coherence between hemispheres, optimizing synchrony between sensations, thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. The practice of meditation allows the relaxation of the peripheral nervous system and the activation of the central nervous system [6].

Regarding the cognitive changes derived from the practice of mindfulness, it has been reported that it strengthens sustained attention [7]. The regular and constant practice of attention through mindfulness develops brain executive functions such as metacognition, which refers to a change in the perspective through which the person acquires the ability to observe its mental activities. Secondly, it denotes cognitive, emotional, and behavioral flexibility, which allows the person to stop clinging to their attachments and habits and is contrary to rigid response patterns. Finally, acceptance implies being able to experience events without defenses, just as they are [5].

The compassion component in mindfulness therapy is associated with the motivation of the practice. It is recognizing the stress, suffering and/or discomfort of all beings while generating the aspiration to help them free themselves from it. It is based on respect for all beings and the conviction that others have the same right as us to be happy and live in peace, as well as in the understanding that all beings are intrinsically kind [8].

Compassion is more than an emotion, unlike empathy, which focuses on resonating with the feeling of another. It does not need to be developed; it is considered an intrinsic characteristic to the experience of sentient beings. Once cultivated, it is long-lasting and stable in the person, unlike emotions that come and go as they are context dependent. Compassion does not distort our perception of reality, while emotions do, and it allows the understanding of the perspective of others and facilitates a new outlook of reality.

Some researchers have pointed out an affective component in compassion, comprising feelings of love, warmth, benevolence, and pro-social motivation, as well as a cognitive component that includes the observational perspective of thoughts, metacognition.

Summarizing the above, compassionate mindfulness therapy is defined as the awareness that arises through purposefully paying attention to the present moment, without judging the experience and engendering in actions with the aspiration to free ourselves and others from stress, suffering, and/or discomfort [9].

Compassionate mindfulness intervention is particularly adaptable to context and abandons the fight against symptoms. Its therapeutic principles encompass the concepts of transcendence, generosity, equanimity, acceptance, interdependence, impermanence, and spirituality. The latter constitutes the foundation of compassionate practice, understood as the person's belief system, which, unlike religion, does not include dogmas and rules of behavior around a divinity. Spirituality explores universal themes such as love, human experience beyond sensory information, altruism, life after death, and wisdom.

This intervention has proven to have positive effects in the treatment of anxiety symptoms in musicians [10], quality of life in children [11], arthritis symptomatology [12], pregnant woman with anxiety symptoms [13], multiple drug users [14], anxiety symptoms and quality of life in asthmatic patients [15] and depressive symptoms and binge eating behavior in obese patients [16].

The positive psychological effect of this intervention is attributed to the fact that through this practice people get to relate to their experience more objectively, considering the common well-being, without being carried away by desires and habits, while understanding that all phenomena are interdependent and transient, managing to take perspective of their mental processes and thoughts.

It is important to continue collecting scientific evidence of the effects of therapy based on compassionate mindfulness, taking care of the methodology so that it can be replicated. After proving its effectiveness in various clinical populations, important evidence can be gathered, so modifications can be made in this intervention that require it to continue helping improve people's quality of life and health.

Conclusion

The components of compassionate mindfulness therapy acquaint for its positive effect on both physical and mental health. Its therapeutic principles encompass the concepts of transcendence, generosity, equanimity, acceptance, interdependence, impermanence, and spirituality. The implementation of meditation for training the mind in a state of calm to objectively distance from emotions, thoughts, and feelings, allows an uncritical state of self-observation in which any cognitive, sensory, emotional, or behavioral content is passively noted without engaging in it. Learning about compassion, acknowledging that all beings want to be freed from stress, suffering and discomfort, while generating the aspiration to help them free themselves from it, allows patients to relate to their individual experiences in a new healthy way.

In recent years the number of people affected by disorders related to poor emotional regulation has increased dramatically. The evaluation of new psychological interventions through adequate methodology is one of the main activities of clinical research. Interventions like compassionate mindfulness-based therapy has proven to be effective in the treating of various disorders, further research in diverse clinical scenarios is needed to continue learning and improving its techniques.

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