

## Mindfulness – Tools to assist the Registered Dietitian in Working with Clients who Struggle with Eating Disorders – Beverly Price, CEDRD, MA, E-200 RYT

Mindfulness is defined as maintaining a moment-by-moment awareness of thoughts, feelings, bodily sensations, and surrounding environment. It also means being aware of these thoughts and feelings without passing judgment on oneself<sup>1</sup>. Its origins come from a Buddhist meditation practice and philosophy. Mindfulness is considered an effective practice with or without the religious context of Buddhism<sup>1</sup>. The objective is to live a life that is more internally centered, meaningful, and with deeper inner peace by using its practices.

Mindfulness and how it applies to a client with an eating disorder:

- Different eating disorders need different methods when to introduce mindful eating. Those with binge eating disorder should be familiarized with it early on in the recovery process. This helps to restore the relationship and negative emotions the client has with food and eating. On the other hand, those with anorexia must heal physically before moving on to the mentality surrounding mealtime<sup>2</sup>.
- The word “willpower” gets thrown around frequently when it comes to controlling food related urges. This is where mindfulness can have a strong impact in those with eating disorders. Creating a new disposition towards eating can enhance cognitive flexibility, which in turn, will lower the need to control or change surroundings. Mindful related exercises require continuous effort and practice but will lead to more acceptance and sincere appreciation<sup>4</sup>.

Benefits of mindfulness practices in eating disorders:

- Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) and Dialectical Behavioral Therapy (DBT) are methods of treatment for eating disorders that look at it from all angles. CBT digs into the thoughts and emotions surrounding why the client was drawn to this kind of behavior in the first place. However, it is common for there to be resistance to change. DBT works with that resistance and provides outlets that help to relieve the stress that causes the problem to begin with<sup>2</sup>.
- Mindfulness means passing on self judgment and judgment of others. It is an influential act to be free of negative thinking towards ones self and observations of others. To make that separation only benefits the client and brings a more positive body image outlook to the forefront. This is where healing really begins.
- Being present and focused in the moment means not thinking about the future or the past – just what’s happening right now. It is a powerful tool to leave the guilt in the past and dissipate the anxiety of the future.
- Mindful yoga and meditation can affect the cerebral cortex, which is the center of the brain that is responsible for impulses, irrational thoughts and behaviors. Activating the cerebral cortex can diminish the impulsivity along with irrational thoughts and behaviors involved in eating disorders

- Patients learn to trust and understand the messages given by their own body and begin to focus on inner qualities instead of physical experience
- Individuals can appreciate their dining experience by experiencing and being intuitive to all the parts of their meal by observing the taste, texture, and smell of the food all while taking time to appreciate the dining experience

Current research on mindfulness and its benefits:

- Many eating disorders coexist with other mental disorders such as depression. Many studies have discovered that mindfulness can bring out positive emotions and suppress negative emotions and stress<sup>1</sup>.
- Practicing mindfulness meditation can boost the immune system and help fight off illness<sup>3</sup>.
- Mindfulness helps focus, which can combat distractions and improve attention<sup>1</sup>.
- Stress reduction: a study by Hoffman, Sawyer, Witt, & Oh, 2010 showed that mindfulness-based therapy may be useful in altering affective and cognitive processes that underlie multiple clinical issues.<sup>4</sup>
- Mindfulness teaches patients to use alternatives to avoidant-based coping and recognize underlying reasons for maladaptive behaviors (Bowen S, Witkiewitz K, Clifasefi SL, et al. Relative Efficacy of Mindfulness-Based Relapse Prevention, Standard Relapse Prevention, and Treatment as Usual for Substance Use Disorders: A Randomized Clinical Trial. JAMA Psychiatry. 2014)<sup>5</sup>

Practice Tools of Mindfulness for clients with eating disorders

- Set an intention before mealtime where the client focuses on something specific whether it is flavor, texture, or eating slowly.
- Put the fork down between bites to naturally slow down the consumption process. It gives the client time to really savor what they are eating.
- Learn the hunger cues and how to abide by them. Check levels of fullness at the start of the meal, in the middle, and afterwards.
- Allow space for conversation or journaling about the emotions that may come up during mealtime. A food and feelings log is a great tool to use for documentation.

References:

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