



Working Towards Wise Mind

Ever notice how you can be a completely rational, logical person one moment and a complete emotional mess the next. Sort of like when you are having a reasonable conversation with your friend/partner, and then 20 minutes you find yourself in a yelling match. You aren't even sure how it happened or what set you off, you just know you don't like it. This shows how quickly people can move from Reasonable mind to Emotional mind. Both mindsets are important--Reasonable mind helps us to function in our world, and Emotion mind tells us if we're living a life congruent with our values and can release the tensions from our day to day life. However, if you find yourself swinging from Rational mind to Emotion mind a lot, or if you are only living in one type of mind, you've robbed yourself of the delights and contentedness of Wise mind.

Wise mind is where Emotion mind and Reasonable mind meet. Have you ever had the experience when you've made a decision, and no matter what others said you just knew it was the right choice for you? The knowing and confidence that comes with this experience is an example of Wise mind. It feels good, it feels right, and you're in a state where you can acknowledge and honour both emotions AND reasonability.

So, how do you get to Wise Mind. Linehan (1993) suggests that the best way to achieve and maintain Wise Mind is through Mindfulness. Mindfulness can be difficult to practice and to buy into at first, but research tells us that once you start practicing regularly it can be one of the most effective strategies in managing emotional deregulation, anxiety, depression and stress. This in turn can lead to improved relationships and feeling overall more contented with life.

The “What” of Mindfulness Skills

Observe

As weird as it sounds at first, the first skill to learn in mindfulness is to just observe states without trying to change anything. The idea is to let yourself experience whatever is in the moment rather than running away from a situation or trying to get rid of the feelings. This can sound counter-intuitive; if you're experiencing emotional pain you have a natural inclination to get rid of it. Does this mean you should spend hours and hours observing your sadness, no, but it is worthwhile to spend some time observing it. Usually when we approach things with an open, curious state we open ourselves up to learn about our self or gain clarity about the situation.

Describe

Learning to describe things can also be hard at the beginning. You might not have the language to describe your experience, but as you practice this will become easier. This part is important to help people learn that just because you *feel* something, it doesn't mean it *is* something. For example, you might *feel* anxious about going to a party. Because you feel afraid, you may think there actually is something to fear even when there isn't. By Describing the situation, (I.e. My stomach muscles cramp and my chest constricts) you can work towards taking some of the judgment away. It's just factual, no judgment required.

Participate

Have you ever had the experience of playing an instrument or sport where you were focused, able to respond to the task with flexibility and you totally let go of being self-conscious. At that moment you were participating in life mindfully. It's that wonderful space where you lose yourself in the moment, and find flow. This is what we're ultimately hoping to grow through mindfulness.

Mindfulness “How” skills

Non Judgmental Stance

This can be a hard one for people. It means observing your reactions with curiosity rather than judgement. We often see things as totally good or bad, but taking a non-judgmental stance encourages us to simply be curious about our reactions. This includes even positive judgments, which, when we're upset, can easily turn into negative ones. This non judgmental stance provides us the permission we sometimes need to feel anger, sadness, or certain thoughts and being okay that they are part of the human experience.

Focusing on one thing in the moment

Have you ever sat down to study, but then catch yourself cruising facebook, eating an apple and talking on the phone all at the same time? As much as some people will praise the skill of multi-tasking, it really isn't that good for us. A huge part of mindfulness is to allow yourself to truly focus, with all your energy on one thing at a time. The quality of things become much richer and even simple tasks can become more rewarding. It's teaching ourselves to really live in the present-something most of us take for granted or believe we don't have control over.

Being Effective

This helps to bring down the tendency to be more concerned about doing what's “right” rather than what works. Sometimes we have to give in and give up our need to “be right” in order to get things done. Sometimes this can include letting go of a fight that you won't win and just walking away. Practicing accepting that sometimes we can't change certain people or situation can go a long way in managing them more effectively.

Activities to Practice Mindfulness

1. Find a comfortable position in your chair. Close your eyes or focus on what spot. Try to simply listen. Observe the sounds you hear. Imagine your brain is like Teflon—any other thoughts you have just slide off as you bring your focus back to listening. Notice any physical sensations or thoughts or emotions that come into being without judgment, resistance or clinging to them. After one to 5 minutes stop and describe your experience to yourself or a friend.
2. At least once a day, complete a body scan. Say to yourself, “I wonder what's going on in my body today”. Start at your head. Do you notice any tension? Relaxation? Work through your entire body just noticing any sensations in your Head, neck, shoulders, back, arms, wrists, hands, lower back,

buttock, thighs, calves, feet, toes. Take note of any discomfort but don't accommodate it until you complete the scan. Now go back and move or stretch any parts that would be soothed by that action.

*Adapted from Linehan, 1993 p. 63-65 Skills Training Manual for Treating Borderline Personality Disorder. The Guilford Press, New York, NY