



UNC School of Social Work's Clinical Lecture Series

**Singing the Blues:  
Honoring Emotional Experience  
through Mindfulness-based  
Treatment of Depression**


**University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill  
School of Social Work  
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# Agenda

- **Characterizing mindfulness**
- **Mindfulness-based CBT for depression**
- **Benefits of mindfulness and relevance to depression**



# **Characterizing mindfulness**



# **What is mindfulness?**

**Paying attention in a particular way:**

- 1) On purpose**
- 2) In the present moment**
- 3) Nonjudgmentally**



# 7 pillars of mindfulness

1. **Nonjudgment – not applying evaluations**
  2. **Patience – without urgency**
  3. **Beginner's mind – openness, curiosity**
  4. **Trust – in one's inner wisdom**
  5. **Nonstriving – process rather than outcome**
  6. **Acceptance – reality as it is**
  7. **Letting go – getting unstuck**
- (Kabat-Zinn, 1990)



# Historical Roots of Mindfulness

- Most systematically articulated and emphasized in Buddhism
- Contemplative traditions in many other religions, including Christianity and Judaism
- Meditation as a spiritual practice
- Meditation as a way to reduce suffering
  - ✧ Now applied to secular context





# Mindfulness in the West as a Secular Practice

- Research on meditation began in late 1950s/early 1960s
- Research on mindfulness meditation as a clinical intervention began in early 1980s
- Insight Meditation Center – founded early 1970s in Barre, MA – Sharon Salzberg, Jack Kornfield, Joseph Goldstein
- Jon Kabat Zinn established the Stress Reduction Clinic in 1979, now the Center for Mindfulness – Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) through the University of Massachusetts Medical Center



# **Mindfulness practice**





# Practice

- Like any skill it takes practice
- Systematic training
- Regular, consistent practice
- Nonstriving – not about achievement; still **practicing** after decades of meditation



# Mindfulness practice

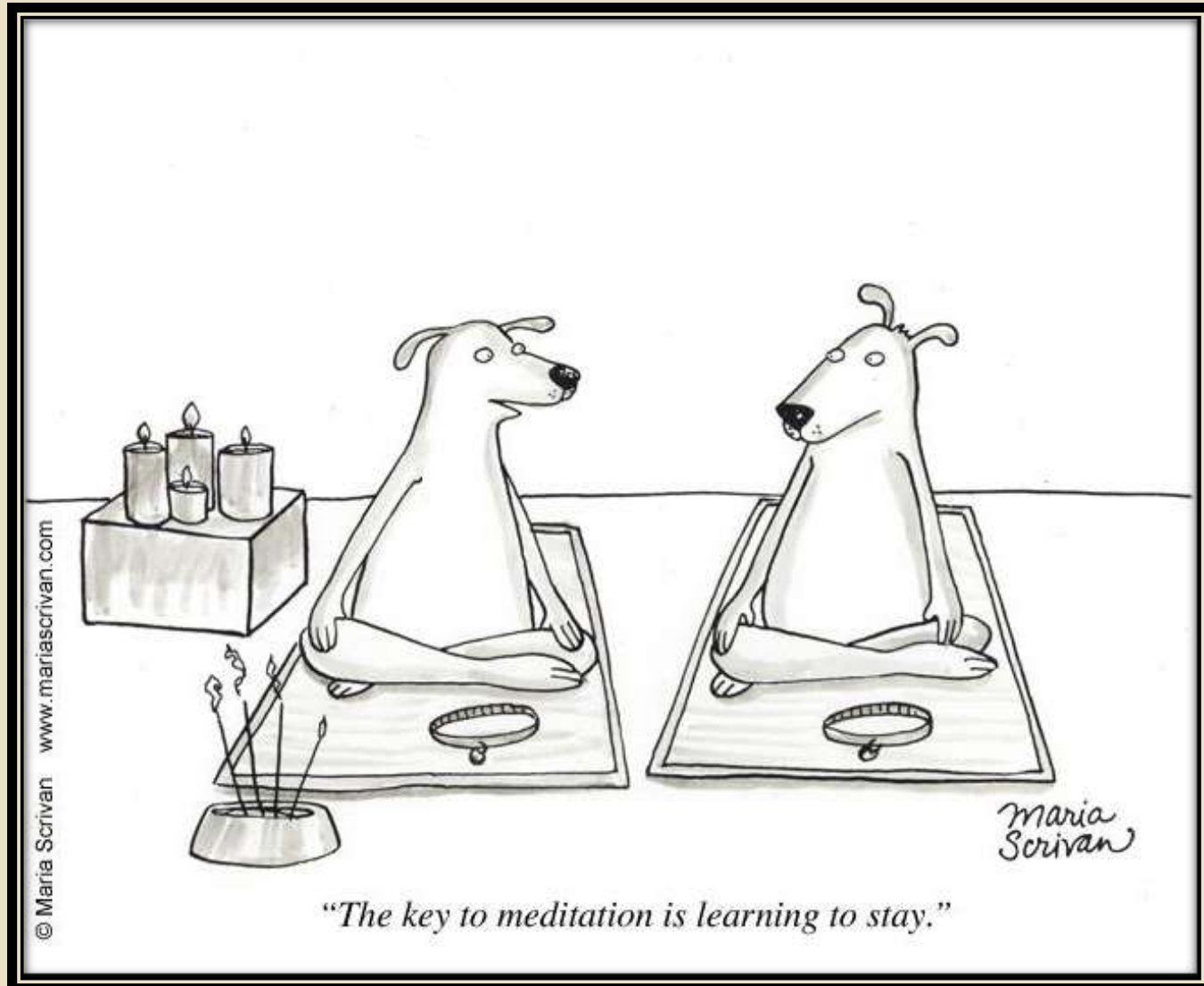
## 1) Formal practice

- **Meditation practice (often 20-40 minutes) to cultivate skillfulness**
- **Vipassana meditation practice – sitting, standing, lying down, walking**
- **Mindful embodiment practice – yoga, tai chi, qigong**

## 2) Informal practice

- **Practice of mindfulness (techniques and metacognitions) in everyday contexts**
- **Directing one's attention**
- **Eating mindfully, washing dishes mindfully, listening to music mindfully**

# Formal practice



*"The key to meditation is learning to stay."*



# Mindfulness Meditation Trains 2 Types of Attention

## Focal Attention

- Directing attention on a chosen object.
- Detecting mind wandering.

## Open Monitoring

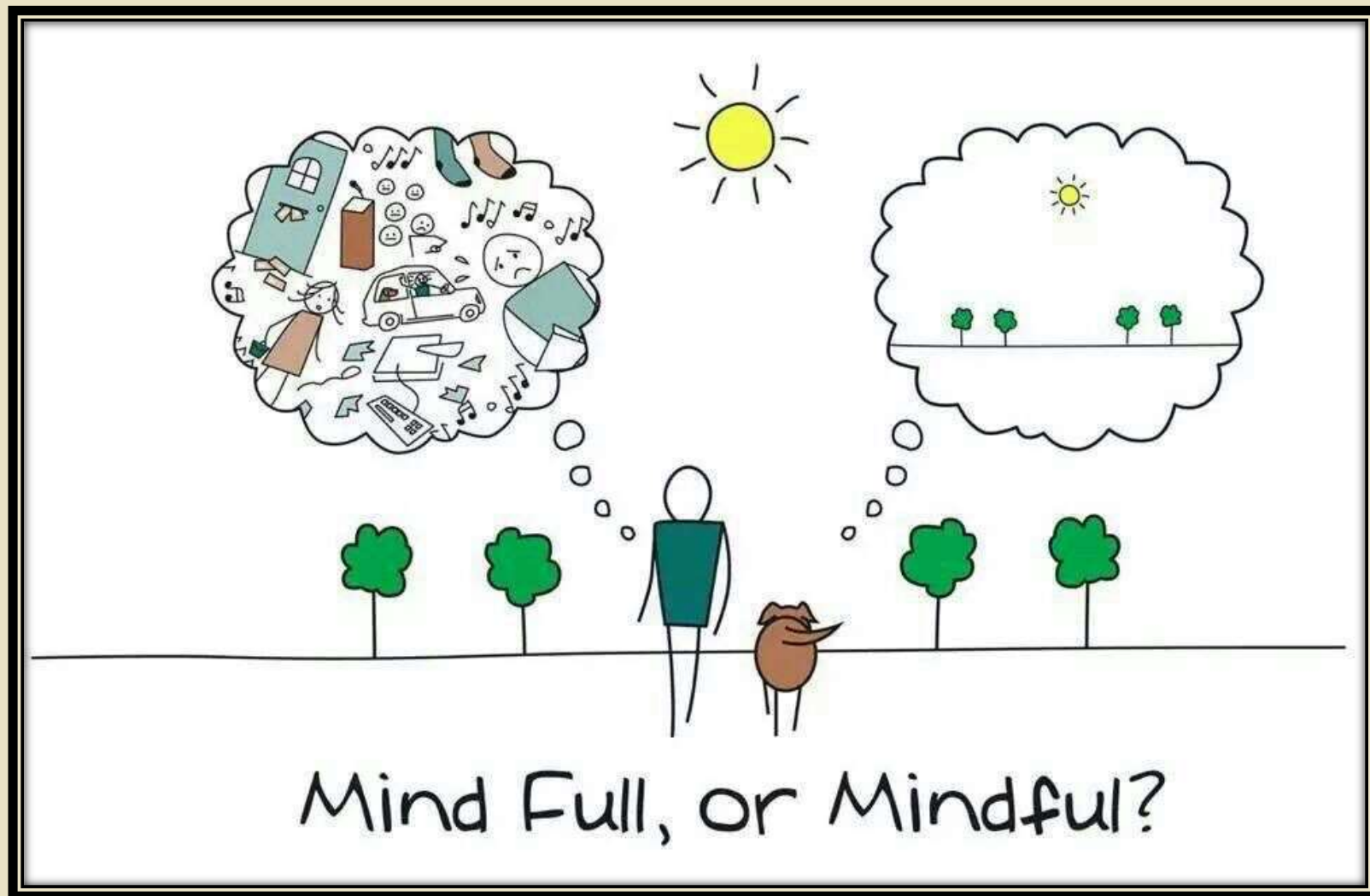
- No explicit focus on objects of awareness.
- Non-evaluative labeling of experience.



# So why don't people practice more?

- Time
- Priorities
- Focus on others
- Not feeling that one is worth it
- Believing that one is doing it “wrong” or not well enough

# Informal practice








# **Mindfulness in everyday life**

- **Take moments throughout the day to observe breath, take a break, or simply check in with yourself with nonjudgmental awareness**
- **Become aware of thoughts, feelings, and sensations throughout the day**
- **Practice nonjudgmental awareness of the present moment**
- **Fully inhabit the body and attend to sensory experience during a daily activity**



# **Mindfulness-based Cognitive Behavioral Therapy**



# Controlled studies of mindfulness-based interventions

- **Overall, two categories of intervention:**

- 1. Meditation-oriented interventions**

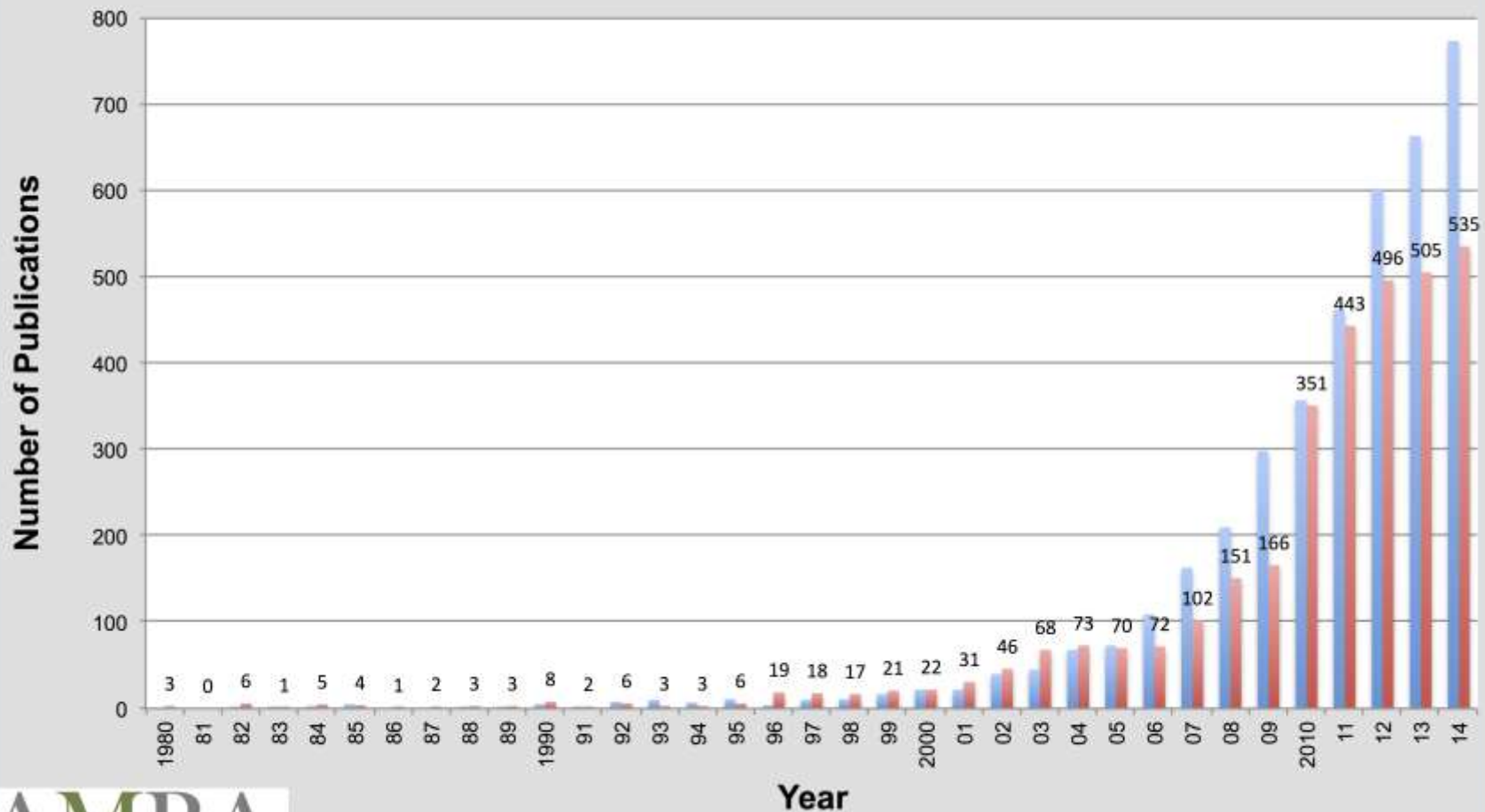
- **Mindfulness-based Stress Reduction (MBSR)**
- **Mindfulness-based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT)**
- **Mindfulness-based Relapse Prevention (MBRP)**

- 2. Interventions that incorporate less formal mindfulness practices and exercises**

- **Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT)**
- **Acceptance & Commitment Therapy (ACT)**

(Bowen et al., 2010; Hayes et al., 1999; Kabat-Zinn, 1990; Linehan, 1993; Segal et al., 2002)

## Mindfulness Journal Publications by Year, 1980-2014



goAMRA.org

<https://goamra.org/resources/>



# Back to the definition of mindfulness

**Paying attention in a particular way:**

**1) On purpose**

➤ **Directing one's attention**

**2) In the present moment**

➤ **Opposite of worrying and ruminating**

**3) Nonjudgmentally**

➤ **Releases attachment to shoulds, contributes to acceptance**



# Mindfulness-based CBT

- **Efforts to avoid or control thoughts and emotions contribute to dysregulation**
  - Thoughts often cannot be controlled
  - Emotions cannot often be controlled
  - Many life situations cannot be controlled
  - Our reactions or responses are within our control
- **Change stance toward emotional experience by observing and accepting**
  - Paradoxical effect that symptoms are often reduced
  - Even when not, distress is.

**Pain x Nonacceptance = Suffering**

(Hayes et al., 1999; Linehan, 1993; Roemer & Orsillo, 2009; Segal et al., 2002; Witkiewitz et al., 2005)





# Focus of MB-CBT

- Focus is on the approach to one's own internal experiences
- Thoughts about and reactions to the emotional experience create distress and suffering
- Focus on meta-cognitions; observe and notice the cognitions and their impact
  - Judgment of emotions
  - Nonacceptance of emotions
- Practice acceptance while moving toward change

(Hayes et al., 1999; Linehan, 1993; Roemer & Orsillo, 2009; Segal et al., 2002; Witkiewitz et al., 2005)



# **MB-CBT Stance and style**

- **Collaborative**
- **The human condition – “we”**
- **Collecting data from a place of curiosity**
- **Investigating hypotheses**
- **Modeling compassion and acceptance of challenges paired with commitment to caring for oneself effectively**




# MB-CBT Format

- **Structured with an agenda**
- **Includes mindfulness practice**
  - **Theoretical use, focused on awareness and nonjudgment of present moment experience**
  - **Contrast to traditional CBT technical use for relaxation**
- **Home practice assignments**
  - **168 hours per week!**



# **MB-CBT Goals for Treatment**

- **Treatment goals are behavioral**
- **Goal of living valued life despite/along with symptoms**
  - **Paradoxical results - symptoms are often reduced**
- **Acquisition and generalization of skills**
  - **Anyone can learn a skill**
  - **Skills develop through practice**
- **Not avoiding experience, even when distressing**
- **Find tenderness and openness toward experience**
- **Balance acceptance and change**



# **Serenity prayer as an example of synthesis**

**God grant me the serenity to accept the  
things I cannot change;**

**The courage to change the things I can;**

**And the wisdom to know the difference.**



# Main messages of mindfulness-based CBT

- **Approach emotions, thoughts, and urges as experiences that come and go**
  - Can facilitate this process through cultivating the ability to release our attachments to controlling our internal experiences and developing our ability to let go
- **Willingness to experience whatever comes**
  - Greeting whatever presents itself (feelings, images, sensations, thoughts)
  - Finding tenderness and openness toward experience
- **Make room for living with the symptom**
  - Idea of living a life worth living, not waiting for symptoms to end before beginning your life
- **Relinquish judgment of ourselves and others**
- **With mindfulness practice, one will begin to perceive alternatives to automatic assumptions and reactions**






Identify habitual patterns; assess whether patterns are helpful or unhelpful

Cultivate commitment to taking care of oneself

Recognize choice points in daily life for wise decision-making



**Mindfulness-based  
Cognitive Behavioral  
Therapy Applied to the  
Territory of Depression**



# Automatic pilot

- Often we live on *automatic pilot*, without awareness of the details of what we are doing
- On automatic pilot, we are more likely to engage in habitual patterns of thinking, which may be maladaptive or unhelpful
- By becoming aware of thoughts, feelings, and body sensations, we cultivate greater capacity to *respond* instead of *react*




# Doing Mode

- **Motivated by achievement, striving for goals**
- **Focused on planning, preparing for goals**
- **Productivity, efficiency**
- **Outcome focus**


# Being Mode

- **Acknowledging what is already here rather than focusing on goals**
- **Direct experience of the present**
- **No need to evaluate experience**
- **Process focus**



# States of mind that enhance vulnerability to depression

- **Automatic pilot**
  - Attention is passive (little intentional control)
  - Tendency toward avoidance or suppression
- **Content**
  - Conditional happiness (in order to be happy...)
  - Rumination centered on self
  - Metacognitive judgments
- **Process**
  - Strong identification with thoughts and feelings
  - Believing the “truth” of automatic thoughts



# **Tools that reduce vulnerability to relapse**


- **Harnessing and shifting attention**
- **Shifting out of habitual cognitive patterns and switching out of automatic pilot**
- **Recognizing mood dependent thinking**
- **Tolerating and exploring difficult experiences**
- **Cognitive defusion**
  - **Thoughts as mental events**
  - **Observe thoughts without getting caught up in the content**





# So that regardless of mood...

- **Automatic pilot → Intentional Mode**
- **Avoidance → Curiosity, openness, acceptance**
- **Rumination → Direct experiencing**
- **Doing mode → Being mode**



# **Benefits of mindfulness for depression**



# **Benefits of mindfulness**

## **#1: Attention**

- **Awakening and shifting out of automatic pilot**
- **Harnessing and shifting attention**
- **Improving attentional control**
- **Attention to present moment experience as an alternative to past focus (e.g., rumination) and future focus (e.g., worrying)**



# **Benefits of mindfulness**

## **#2: Nonjudgmental awareness**

- **Enhancing self-awareness through an attitude of curiosity**
- **Becoming aware of habitual patterns**
- **Assessing what is healthy versus harmful (an alternative to judgments)**



# **Benefits of mindfulness**

## **#3: Cognitive flexibility**

- **After becoming aware of habitual patterns (e.g., avoidance) and learning what is helpful versus helpful, we open up to alternatives and clarify the range of choices that are available**
- **Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom.**
  - ~ Viktor Frankl



# **Benefits of mindfulness**

## **#4: Emotion regulation**

- **All emotions are important; learn to tolerate and accept distressing emotions**
- **Tolerating and exploring difficult experiences (exposure)**
- **Developing distress tolerance skills**
- **Developing emotion regulation skills**





# **Benefits of mindfulness**

## **#5: Cognitive Defusion**

- **Also known as decentering and re-perceiving**
- **Thoughts as mental events**
- **Not necessarily true – thoughts are not facts**
- **Observe thoughts without getting caught up in the content**
- **Metaphors**



# **Experiential Exercise: Mindfulness Practice**

**Noting internal  
experiences**



**Thoughts**

**Emotions**

**Images**

**Sensations**

**Urges**



# Practicing Awareness

Observations about the  
experience of the  
mindfulness practice



# **Benefits of mindfulness**

## **#6: Cultivating compassion**

- **Bringing a kind, friendly awareness to current experience**
- **Caring for oneself and others, particularly in the face of hardship**
- **Including oneself in one's compassion**
- **Provides intervention for self-directed anger as well as other-directed anger**



# **Benefits of mindfulness**

## **#7: Radical acceptance**

- **Curiosity, investigating without judgment or rejection**
- **“How interesting, there you are again”**
- **Acknowledging reality as it is**
- **Letting go of fighting reality and deciding to tolerate things as they are**
- **Acceptance is not approval, it is not agreement, and it is not resignation**
- **Embracing things as they are actually creates the opportunity to consider change.**





# Radical Acceptance

**For after all, the best thing  
one can do when it's raining is  
to let it rain.**

**~ Henry Wadsworth Longfellow  
(*The Poet's Tale*)**





**Practice:**  
**Mindfulness of difficulty**





# Practicing Awareness

Observations about the  
experience of the  
mindfulness practice

# Case Example





Identify habitual patterns; assess whether patterns are helpful or unhelpful

Cultivate commitment to taking care of oneself

Recognize choice points in daily life for wise decision-making





# Still some sadness...



- Distinguishing between sadness and depression
- Allowing emotion; responding with self-compassion and self-nurturance







# **Invitation for Questions & Feedback**

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