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FAMILY THERAPY MAGAZINE

THE AMERICAN ASSOCIATION FOR MARRIAGE AND FAMILY THERAPY

MINDFULNESS IN MFT: A powerful and versatile tool that systemic therapists are using in daily practice to regulate distress, mitigate dysfunction, and improve family functioning. | PAGE 10

MINDFULNESS IN SCHOOLS: Schools are adding mindfulness to their curricula to improve behavioral and academic outcomes with positive results. | PAGE 14

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mindfulness

An Eastern Practice Becomes a Staple of Systemic Therapy



Incorporating Mindfulness into Couples Work: A Neurobiological Perspective

Mindfulness has become both a popular and scientific term in today's society, and being mindful may foster deeper interpersonal connections, non-judgmental attention, awareness, and acceptance. Incorporating

mindful-based techniques in couples work can be beneficial in regulating distress that is often found within close partner relationships.

Deborah C. Moore, PhD



Mindfulness in Schools: Teaching Focus, Self-Regulation, and Kindness

Well established as an intervention for adult depression and anxiety, mindfulness has been increasingly used with children. Promising research indicates it may help children improve attention, mood regulation, behavior, social outcomes,

academic performance, and sense of well-being. **Diane R. Gehart, PhD**



Yoga as Self-Care

Self-care is something that we as therapists often tell our clients to engage in, but is often lacking in our own lives. Between clients and family obligations, it can sometimes feel like there is no time left for yourself. However, self-care should be an essential part of our lives.

Linda Meier Abdelsayed, MA

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“ True self-care allows us to live the life we want to live without feeling the need to escape it.”



yoga

AS SELF-CARE

Linda Meier Abdelsayed, MA



Self-care is something that we as therapists often tell our clients to engage in, but is often lacking in our own lives. Between evening client appointments, family obligations, and the mental strain of seeing people who rely on you for their mental health, it can sometimes feel like there is no time left for yourself. Just like your clients find reasons for why they don't have time for self-care, so can you. However, self-care should be an essential part of our lives.

One of the reasons self-care is so difficult to maintain is that we have a flawed view of what self-care should be. Going to the spa, getting a massage, or going on vacation are all really great ideas, but at their core, they help us escape our lives, rather than support us in living them.

True self-care looks different (McCall, 2007).



True self-care allows us to live the life we want to live without feeling the need to escape it. True self-care could be something like re-evaluating your budget so that you don't have to work that second job, or backing out of a toxic friendship. True self-care isn't sexy or flashy. It is the small things that you do on a daily basis to help you love your life.

The benefits of yoga

One way of doing this is by following some simple principles of yoga. According to Harvard Health Publishing (2018), yoga and meditation have been studied since the 1970s as possible treatments for depression and anxiety and continue to gain in popularity each year as a source of self-care in the general population of the U.S. One of the main features of yoga is that it helps regulate our stress response. In today's society, life has become so stressful. Between the assault of city noises on our auditory systems, to the pressures of increased financial strains to be able to live in the city, to the increased stressors of

our clients, we as clinicians are on a higher alertness level. This means that our bodies are under a constant state of stress. Yoga is a great way to combat that level of stress and bring our bodies back to a state of calm. Yoga, through its breathing techniques, meditation techniques, and relaxation skills, gives our body the chance to regulate itself and calm down. It reduces our heart rate, our blood pressure, and gives us a chance to regulate our breathing, which all help our bodies calm down and feel more relaxed (McCall, 2007; Stelter, 2018).

Stretching, deep breathing, and meditation help to improve overall physical fitness, strength, flexibility, and lung capacity. This in turn reduces heart rate, blood pressure, and back pain (Court, 2018; Stelter, 2018). Other research shows yoga may help in strengthening social attachments, reducing stress, and relieving anxiety, depression, and insomnia (Novotney, 2009). Many clinicians are now starting to embrace yoga as a complement to psychotherapy.

One benefit of practicing yoga is that it is a natural and readily accessible approach to maintaining wellness and treating mental health. It is low impact, so people with different physical constraints can participate in it. According to Dr. Sat Bir Khalsa (2004), a neuroscientist and professor of medicine at Harvard Medical school, yoga targets unmanaged stress, which is a key component in chronic illnesses such as anxiety, depression, obesity, diabetes, and insomnia. He states that yoga reduces the stress response, which is in the sympathetic nervous system, and reduces the stress hormone cortisol. Yoga enhances resilience and improves mind-body awareness, which can help people adjust their behaviors based on the feelings that they experience in their bodies (Novotney, 2009).

There is also a huge social aspect to yoga that mental health therapy alone often times cannot maintain. Attending a yoga class, where everyone breathes at the same time, practices the same pose at the same

time, and engages with each other throughout the practice allows its members to feel a sense of belonging and being a part of something bigger. Acting in synchrony with others increases cooperation and collectivism amongst group members (Wiltermuth & Heath, 2009).

In 2006, the Department of Defense began to research the positive effects that yoga can have on war veterans with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (Integrative Restoration Institute, 2018). In their study, called iRest, soldiers participated in yoga two times per week for a total of nine weeks. Following the iRest program, soldiers reported a reduction in insomnia, depression, anxiety and fear, improved interpersonal relationships, and an increased sense of control over their own lives. The iRest program has been so successful that it is now available in many VA facilities.

How can we, as mental health professionals, incorporate yoga into our daily lives so that we can also benefit from its immense powers? Attending yoga classes is a great way to start, but if you don't have time to attend a class, or want to start off slowly, you can try the following suggestions and see which one works for you.

Setting intentions

One of the core themes at the beginning of each yoga session is to set an intention. The idea behind it is that this intention is something that you will focus on during your one-hour practice, with the hope of carrying that intention with you for the rest of your day. We often set intentions when thinking about our clients. We think of what we want to accomplish during our sessions, what we might want to teach our clients before we even check in with them that day. This style of intention can actually go against you, as clients will often come in with crises of the week, or different topics that they want to discuss. How often have you left a session and thought to yourself, "well that didn't go as planned," or left a session feeling

In yoga, the intention of the practice is never centered around a specific pose or goal.

Rather, common intentions are "*patience*" or "*compassion*."

frustrated because your client has yet again not followed through with the homework that you assigned? Your intentions for your sessions might need to be re-evaluated.

In yoga, the intention of the practice is never centered around a specific pose or goal. Rather, common intentions are "patience" or "compassion." Going into session with the intention of being patient with a client or showing compassion will result in a totally different outcome. Usually, clients will feel heard, feel connected to you, and will come up with ideas on how to manage their life stressors on their own. You may also leave sessions feeling more at peace, in control, and connected to your client. Most clients who seek therapy are coming in because they have a life stressor that they cannot cope with or manage. Having someone present during that struggle, someone who shows patience and compassion, can help most clients.

Structuring your day

Styles of yoga might change from session to session, but the sequence usually remains the same. You usually start with a warm up—something to get the blood flowing and awaken your body. This usually takes the first 15 minutes of class. That is followed by increasingly more active and challenging poses. You move from pose to pose increasing in intensity for the next 45 minutes, building from pose to pose. You frequently will repeat sequences, with small periods of rest to give your body a chance to acclimate. Finally, you end your yoga class with a 15-minute cooldown to give your body a chance to calm down again.

This sequence of events, moving from warm up to active to cool down, can be mirrored in your daily life. Waking up in the morning and taking your time to eat a healthy breakfast and getting ready for the day is your warm up. The active phase of your day is usually spent seeing clients. If you are at the top of your game, you usually give yourself 5-10 minutes between clients to acclimate and rest. Once you are finished with your clients, there is a cool down phase that needs to occur so that your mind and body have enough time to calm down before sleep. But how often does this sequence really occur in your life? How many mornings are you running out of the house with a cup of coffee because you had to accommodate that 8:00 a.m. client? Or, how often are you racing from appointment to appointment because your sessions keep running over time? Or, how often are you seeing evening clients until 9:00 p.m. at night in order to build your caseload, thus foregoing the cooldown period your body and mind need at the end of the day?

We have all been there—overextending ourselves in order to pay the bills, or because we want to build our practice, or we just don't know how to say no. There are always valid reasons for making that choice. What you need to ask yourself is "at what cost"? What part of your quality of life are you giving up to make this happen?

Self-compassion

Anyone who has attended a yoga class has heard about self-compassion. It usually accompanies a difficult or challenging pose. The instructor will warn you ahead of time and say, "If you



Being kind and compassionate to *ourselves* is one of the greatest forms of self-care. We need to be able to forgive ourselves when we have an off day, or conflict with a client. It's okay to not have all of the answers right away.

stumble or even fall, is that okay for you? Can you tolerate it? If it happens, check in with yourself, be kind to yourself, and try again." Being kind and compassionate to ourselves is one of the greatest forms of self-care. We need to be able to forgive ourselves when we have an off day, or conflict with a client. It's okay to not have all of the answers right away. It's okay to tell a client, "You know that's a really great question, and I don't have an answer for you right now, but I'll look into it and get back to you."

We tend to be really great at telling our clients when to challenge their negative self-talk, and not so good at doing the same for ourselves. Our negative self-talk has had a purpose for a long time. It's pushed us to achieve well in school and become therapists. It helps us think critically and logically about our cases. In all of that, though, it's easy to forget that we are human, too. That we make mistakes, too. When those mistakes happen, or when we don't know what to say, or after a difficult session, are you able to be compassionate towards yourself and simply tell yourself "I will try again"?

Incorporating these yoga principals into your daily life can drastically help improve your quality of life. Not only can this style of self-care reduce the chances of burn-out, but you may feel lighter leaving sessions. Incorporating yoga classes, or even yoga principles, into your clinical practice could impact you, and your clients, in a positive way.



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