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Tan Ping Angeline Teoh, Olya Zaporozhets**AN APPLICATION OF THE CHRIST-CENTERED
MINDFULNESS AND ACCEPTANCE BASED THERAPY
IN A CHRISTIAN CONTEXT**

Автори розглядають проблему застосування інтервенцій повноти усвідомлення (mindfulness) та прийняття в християнському контексті. Ці інтервенції отримують зростаючу увагу в галузі практичної психології, як остання хвиля поведінкової терапії, яка застосовується для лікування осіб із розладами настрою та інших супутніх психо-емоційними проблем. У той же час було висловлено занепокоєння в колах психологів-християн через застосування повноти усвідомлення в терапії через зв'язки, які деякі курси повноти усвідомлення мають із буддійським навчанням та темами.

Мета цієї статті – дати огляд і визначення повноти усвідомлення, а також розглянути її основні принципи практики. Авторитакже роз'яснюють, як методика повноти усвідомлення можуть бути інтегровані з христоцентричною перспективою. Зокрема, автори дають пояснення, як повнота усвідомлення (1) узгоджується з біблійним вченням, (2) може допомогти у процесі спрощення та відновлення в ситуаціях страждань і болю.

Ключові слова: повнота пізнання, приймання, інтеграція, християнське консультування, Христосцентрована терапія.

Автори рассматривают проблему применения интервенций полноты осознания (mindfulness) и принятия в христианском контексте. Эти интервенции получают растущее внимание в области практической психологии, как последняя волна поведенческой терапии, применяемой для лечения лиц с расстройствами настроения и других сопутствующих психо-эмоциональными проблем. В то же время была выражена обеспокоенность в кругах психологов-христиан из-за применения полноты осознания в терапии через связи, которые некоторые курсы полноты осознания имеют с буддийским учением и темами.

Цель этой статьи – дать обзор и определения полноты осознания, а так же рассмотреть её основные принципы практи-

ки Авторы также поясняют как методики полноты осознания могут быть интегрированы с христороцентричной перспективой. В частности, авторы дают объяснения, как полнота осознания (1) согласуется с библейским учением, (2) может помочь в процессе прощения и восстановления в ситуациях страдания и боли.

Ключевые слова: полнота осознания, прием, интеграция, христианское консультирование, Христосцентрирована терапия

Authors review the problem of mindfulness and acceptance based interventions (MABI) application in the Christian context. MABI have received much attention in the mental health field as the latest wave of behavioural therapy for treating individuals with mood disorders and other comorbid psycho-emotional problems. At the same time, the concern about applying mindfulness in therapy has been expressed amongst Christians in the mental health circle due to the connections of mindfulness courses with Buddhist teachings and themes.

The purpose of this article is to give an overview and definition of mindfulness and its core practice guidelines. The authors will also clarify how MABI are amenable to integrating with a Christ-centered perspective. In particular, the authors will provide an explanation of how MABI (a) is consistent with Biblical teaching, (b) can help to facilitate forgiveness and restoration process in the situations of suffering and pain.

Key words: mindfulness, acceptance, integration, Christian counselling, Christ-centered therapy.

The Problem. Mindfulness and Acceptance Based Interventions (MABIs) have received increasing attention in the mental health field as the latest wave of behavioral therapy for treating individuals with mood, anxiety, attention deficit, psychosis, and substance use disorders. Despite relatively small evidence base mindfulness and acceptance based interventions continue to be applied and studied as clinical strategies by mental health professionals. At the same time the concern has been expressed amongst Christians in the mental health circle about applying mindfulness in therapy due to the connections that some mindfulness courses have with Buddhist teachings and themes.

The Analysis of the Current Research and Publications. MABIs have become known as the third wave of behavioural therapy for more than a decade now [1]. These interventions have increasingly been used to treat clients with mood, anxiety, attention deficit, psychosis, and substance use disorders [2]. Growing research in this area have often shown positive treatment outcomes, though specific conditions

and processes leading to symptom reduction have not been well established and necessitates further research [1; 2; 3; 4; 5].

Nevertheless, as an alternative to cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), MABIs have shown promising outcomes in individuals from diverse cultures and ethnic minority populations [3]. Reviews of empirical studies on patients involved in Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) showed that relapse rates were reduced among individuals with three or more episodes of depression, where both symptomatic and psychosocial outcomes were improved [2]. Teasdale, Williams, and Segal substantiated these findings with striking results in MBCT studies done internationally [6]. They found 40-50 percent reduction in depressive symptoms recurrence rates after twelve months of MBCT treatment completion and suggested that in some instances MBCT was as effective as antidepressants in preventing new episode of depression.

The evidence of the efficacy of MBCT self-help techniques was also summarized in meta-analyses, where multiple studies indicated significantly lower levels of anxiety and depressive symptoms in participants after MBCT application [7]. In fact, informal practice of mindfulness was confirmed to be important for long term follow-up outcomes in individuals diagnosed with Generalized Anxiety Disorder as they were able to flexibly apply what they learnt to busy life circumstances, months after undergoing the intervention [8].

As resources on MABIs become more understood and available, researchers strived to explain what appears to make them work in therapy. Vøllestad, et al. suggested that because individuals became present-centered, they have experienced a shift in their relationship with their negative emotions and have stopped avoiding, controlling, or suppressing their difficulties [5]. Morgan et al. echoed similar observations that «[b]ecause of the present-focused nature of mindfulness practice, it may be an effective long term skill to counter the future-oriented nature of anxiety and worry» [8, p. 176]. Researchers also have noted that mindful awareness and acceptance of one's difficulties help an individual to normalize and validate experienced emotional distress [3]. Therefore, it is not surprising that there is growing support for MABI being effective with wider concerns and difficult life situations beyond mere symptom removal [5; 8].

Nevertheless, some Christian counsellors raised a concern of the compatibility of MABIs with Christian values and a biblical perspective [1; 9; 10] as many mindfulness courses have their roots in Bud-

dhism. Christian psychologists and therapists in the United Kingdom have, in fact, been debating whether they should remove all references to Buddhism in order to create either a secular or Christian version of mindfulness practices [9].

The Purpose of the Article. In this article the authors will be to give an overview and definition of mindfulness and its core practice guidelines. The authors will also clarify how MABI are amenable to integrating with a Christ-centered perspective. In particular, the authors will provide an explanation of how MABI (a) is consistent with Biblical teaching, (b) can help to facilitate forgiveness and restoration process in the situations of suffering and pain.

Main Material Presentation.

Mindfulness Overview. In order to define mindfulness in therapy, it is important to mention the work of key pioneers of MBCT that offer easily comprehensible concepts. For example, Teasdale, et al.'s «The Mindful Way Workbook» offers a guided self-help exercises within an eight week program [6]. This self-help workbook is the manifestation of the pioneers' emphasis on making mindfulness accessible by individuals from any religious or philosophical worldview including professionals and lay people, and in so doing, their MBCT programs have been removed from the Buddhist context [10]. Teasdale, et al.'s «The Mindful Way Workbook» provides simple introductory information and several guided exercises to help users practice alternatives to one's current mode of functioning [6]. It is beyond the scope of this article to sufficiently explain the workbook's weekly lessons. However, four key concepts will be distilled for further discussion.

1. Beyond Automatic Pilot Mode. There is a «difference between really living life as it happens and our more usual way of rushing through life – without seeing, tasting, smelling, or touching – out of touch with the world. Just as we often «drive on automatic pilot,» careful reflection reveals that we also «live on automatic pilot» much of the time» [6, p.41]. The MBCT program thus offers mindfulness as a way to awaken from one's automatic pilot mode of functioning, so that rather than being detached from the richness and beauty of life in every moment, one can observe the mundane or familiar in refreshing, vivid and engaging ways.

Through practicing body scans daily and a mindful eating exercise, one becomes aware of his or her thoughts, physical sensations, and feelings. The purpose of the body scan and mindful eating exercise is to bring one's gentle awareness and sense of curiosity to an experience in

order to change his or her perception of it. Such mindfulness practice trains the person to notice old habits of mind that might keep him or her stuck in unwanted emotions. It also enables one to notice things that are otherwise missed so that early warning signs of slipping into depression, anxieties or fatigue are more likely to be spotted.

The key in the daily body scan practice is that the agenda is not to strive for relaxation or any other special state. It is not as important what sensations one becomes aware of, as it is to be attuned to the direct physical sensations. In other words, the person is encouraged to observe and be aware of present sensations rather than to be tangled up *thinking* about the sensations.

2. *Gathering the scattered mind to be in the present.* Through combining stretching and the sitting meditation, one practices letting go of the thinking mind to focus on the breath. These practices remind the person, too, that regardless of what has happened in the past, one can always begin again in a present moment by simply *doing* the practice rather than *dwelling* on any previous failures to practice. MBCT aims to use mindfulness as a means to gather the scattered mind and relate more skilfully to difficult emotions as they come about, wherever the person is present. Hence the three-minute breathing space serves as a mini meditation and a useful alternative to other meditation exercises like the body scan, sitting meditation, or mindful movement. The three-minute breathing space exercise is brief and one is encouraged to do this as regularly as one can remember to do so on a daily basis. For a start, it is recommended to choose the same times each day for doing the three-minute exercise so that they can be embedded easily in the firm fixtures of one's daily routine.

3. *Allowing things to be.* Participants practice to combine mindful breathing exercises with acceptance themes. Prior to this, participants would have practiced mindful recognition of aversion. Aversion manifests predominantly in two different ways (a) a feeling of not wanting things to be as they are and needing things to be different; and (b) a sensation in the body such as contraction, resistance, tightness, or intensity, which is sometimes felt in the facial area hands, shoulders, chest, or abdomen. Through regular practice of combining the sitting meditation with mindful awareness of the breath, body, sounds and thoughts, one gradually notices one's own «aversion signature» [6, p. 117].

As such, the invitation is now given to discover a different, more skilful way to respond to difficulties with an attitude of openness,

gentleness and kind awareness. The importance of cultivating such an attitude of acceptance is evident when one sees that reacting automatically with aversion gets one stuck in unwanted emotional states. On the contrary, shifting one's reaction to aversion from not wanting it to opening up to it, «allows the chain of habitual automatic reactions to be broken» [6, p.135]. Even if the unpleasant feelings do not dissipate, one is reminded that the intention is not to change the feelings, but to ease one's relationship of aversion to them, allowing the experience to be and simply observing it without judgment.

4. Kindness in action. As participants near the end of their eight-week program, they would have been exposed to an array of mindful breathing exercises with varying acceptance themes. From this array, they are to select and do sustainable mindfulness practices over the week, particularly those that are effective in letting them stay anchored and centered in their breath, as well as in reminding them to exercise self-compassion and non-judgment. They will also be guided to become conscious of mastery and pleasure activities that can effectively improve their moods.

Tips on keeping depression at bay include reminders to be intentional about not waiting for motivation to precede such activities. One has to also be conscious about how resting can increase tiredness instead of refreshing oneself. Finally, participants are guided to recognize thoughts that undermine their motivation and efforts to engage in activities that are effective in increasing their wellbeing.

Integrating Mindfulness with Christian Practices. A mindfulness approach like Teasdale et al.'s [6] can be easily amenable to integrating with Christian practices. Christian tradition is actually full of contemplative, meditative, or centering prayers that contain aspects of mindfulness and acceptance [1]. It is important to mention that they are part of a Judeo-Christian heritage and these Christian practices pre-date Buddhism [9].

It is well noted that prayer becomes central in the situations of suffering and pain. Christians who deal with suffering may experience extreme negative emotions, which they often pour out to God in emotional prayers and lament. Wang, Strosky and Fletes [11] refer to lament as the «language of the soul,» spoken by Christ himself. In such situations MBCT can potentially facilitate clients' present-centered awareness of trauma-related emotions as well as their God-given breath as they continue their open dialogue with God. In such situations clients can

also practice non-judgmental observation of their experience, compassion, and self- and other- forgiveness, which are all natural elements of MBCT, many of which were modelled by Christ himself.

A biblical perspective of posttraumatic growth includes experiencing adversity and trauma by focusing on God's power being made perfect in one's weakness (2 Corinthians 12: 9-10). Unlike humanistic psychology, it does not encourage person's self-sufficiency which leads to pride. Instead, it centers on Christ, that leads to Christ-centered resilience[12]. Nevertheless, in listener's good intentions to remind suffering individuals to look up to Christ, the risk arises that a suffering person may feel that his or her trauma gets trivialized [11]. Therefore, in order to avoid this risk a therapist may change the treatment strategy and minimize talk therapy. Instead, a client can practice mindful presence.

Christian counselors can look to our Lord Jesus' example in Luke 7: 44-47, who quietly allowed the immoral woman to mindfully bask in his goodness, and to receive his forgiveness with gratitude. Jesus only spoke up to answer the Pharisees' thoughts which were condemning towards the woman. Jesus' countenance towards sin is that of grace and mercy and MABIs could very well become a conduit for individuals to experience His acceptance and compassion richly without reaffirming their sin. He beckons all to himself – all who feel condemned or are in pain so that his love and forgiveness can be felt in full. As Prince has stated, «The more you realize that you have been forgiven much, actually, of *all* your sins, the more you will love the Lord Jesus. Forgiveness does not lead to a lifestyle of sin... It leads to a life of glorifying the Lord Jesus.» [13, p. 101, italics added]. Therefore, if healing is brought through experiencing Christ, therapists can facilitate hurting clients' own mindful and unique alabaster jar experiences with the help of mindful presence with the Lord.

Conclusion. Mindfulness and acceptance based interventions represent a set of tools that can be helpful in treating Christian clients and facilitating their dialogue with God, so that they experience forgiveness, and restoration. These techniques can be applied in the situations of suffering and hurt along with contemplative, meditative, or centring prayers that add depth to the spiritual experience of the client and facilitate the healing process.

Nevertheless, seeing MABIs as merely a set of tools or techniques risks falling short of what mindfulness embodies. Mindfulness is best tasted by the Christian practitioner or therapist prior to using it as an

intervention. MBCT as presented by Teasdale et al.'s (2014) self-help resource is hence, a relatively effective way of allowing the therapist a minimal length of time to contemplate intentionally on the Christ-centered aspects of practicing mindfulness. Only having had first-hand experience of Christ-centered mindfulness, can the therapist confidently and convincingly share its benefits with Christian clients without slipping into mere manual-style mindfulness administering. Indeed, mindfulness cannot be administered. It is lived in one's God-given breath.

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