

# Living in the Present Moment:

## The Practice of Mindfulness meditation as an antidote for psychological distress.

By Dr Melissa Ree PhD

- ? Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) is an evidence-based psychological intervention designed to help reduce the psychological distress associated with a wide range of psychiatric and medical diagnoses.
- ? MBCT programs teach participants to stay in touch with the present moment and disengage from cycles of negative thinking.
- ? Mindfulness-based approaches also encourage participants to become aware of how thinking patterns can promote depression and anxiety.
- ? Private Clinics Australia is currently running a Mindfulness Program in West Perth.

Private Clinics Australia is running a pilot series of Mindfulness Programs in West Perth. These programs will be run by Mr Mark Craigie and Dr Melissa Ree. Programs consist of eight weekly classes held on a weekday evening involving between 6 and 8 participants. Programs will run in June and September. Due to the research and pilot nature of these initial groups, there is a nominal cost to participants.

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### What is meant by Mindfulness?

Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) is a meditation-based psychological intervention designed to help reduce psychological distress associated with a wide range of psychiatric and medical diagnoses.

In recent multi-centre randomised controlled trials, MBCT was significantly more effective than treatment as usual in reducing the risk of relapse for individuals recovering from recurrent depression.

### Origins and outcomes of MBCT

MBCT is based on Jon Kabat Zinn's widely used and successful Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction program that was developed in the United States in the 1970s for management of chronic pain and associated distress. It is an approach that is increasingly being adapted and integrated into psychological-based interventions for a variety of problems. For example, locally, Mark Craigie at Curtin University recently completed PhD studies that support the use of MBCT in patients with generalised anxiety disorder.

Mindfulness Meditation borrows from Buddhist meditative practices, and involves becoming more aware of a present moment experience in an accepting and non-judgemental way. It is about getting out of the 'doing mode' that most people spend so much time in, and getting into a 'being mode'. So often life is spent rushing from one moment to the next, and for patients with chronic psychiatric or medical conditions, this can be dangerous because warning signs are not picked up and acted upon.

The enhanced awareness of the present moment taught in Mindfulness helps patients quickly recognise and skilfully respond to difficult or painful experiences, "nipping in the bud" unhelpful ways of reacting to their distress before it escalates. Mindfulness meditation can also result in a fuller and richer experience of life because it is really noticed rather than rushed through.

The word "Therapy" in Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy does not mean MBCT programs are regular Cognitive Therapy programs. It is more accurate to think of MBCT sessions as skills-based classes, rather than therapy sessions. The program focuses on developing mindfulness skills, and a more proactive and accepting approach to life's challenges.

MBCT includes breathing meditations and yoga stretches to help participants become more aware of the present moment – in this case, moment-to-moment changes in mind and body. During eight weekly sessions, and by listening regularly to tapes, participants learn mindfulness meditation.

In addition to helping prevent relapse in depression, mindfulness-based approaches have

*“Mindfulness means paying attention in a particular way, on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgementally”*

– John Kabat-Zinn

demonstrated effectiveness in reducing anxiety and stress, improving quality of life, and managing difficult emotions associated with chronic illness and chronic pain.

### Aims of the Mindfulness-Based approach

While participants learn to stay in touch with the present, without ruminating about the past or worrying about the future, the core skills they learn disengage them from vicious cycles of negative thinking. With this comes awareness of how thinking patterns can promote depression and anxiety. A focus on 'warning signs' of relapse and how participants can look after themselves when depression or anxiety threatens, has a preventive focus.

Mindfulness-based approaches also aim to:

- ? Help improve concentration.
- ? Assist participants to view themselves and their world more objectively and become more aware of automatic reactions to difficulties and distress.
- ? Teach skills for acceptance of unwanted thoughts and feelings.
- ? Teach the most skilful response to unpleasant thoughts, feelings, or situations.

### Core skills taught in Mindfulness Programs

- ? Breathing meditation.
- ? Body scan meditation.
- ? Yoga meditation.
- ? Experiential living.
- ? Being aware of warning signs of distress.

### Patient suitability for a Mindfulness Program

A wide range of problems may be helped, such as:

- ? Stress – occupational, family, financial.
- ? Mild to moderate depression.
- ? Chronic pain and illness.
- ? Anxiety and panic.
- ? Sleep disturbances.
- ? Fatigue.
- ? High blood pressure.
- ? Headaches.