



Mind-Body Awareness in the Treatment of Eating Disorders and Obesity

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Learning objectives:

Participants will have the opportunity to gain:

- An understanding of how Mind-Body Awareness applies to the treatment of eating disorders and obesity.
- A firsthand experience of some aspects of this approach and its possible application in a dance movement therapy setting.
- Exploring the five central aspects of working with clients using Mind-Body Awareness focusing on emotion regulation and reclaiming sensory experience.

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“At the very beginning of therapy I didn’t have the feeling that I had a problem. I didn’t notice that I had a body. My head was thinking, but I wasn’t aware of what I was touching. I’ve learned to sense where I am. I didn’t use to respect myself. In learning how to sense myself, I’ve found support for ongoing physical and emotional self-respect. Now, whenever I’m nervous, I put my hands on my stomach. That helps me a lot. And when I do that, I become aware of the fact that I do exist.”

24 year old woman, coping with bulimia (Rytz 2009)

Mind-Body Awareness orients itself on the actual human physiology specifically in regards to its Neuroplasticity. Research has shown, that the nervous system is able to reorganize itself through specific use or training (such as mindful body awareness) enabling learning and a dynamic reorganisation promoting change in behavior, emotion regulation and a sense of control in regards to compulsive patterns; such as binge eating, body checking, dieting or over eating. Mind-Body Awareness has shown itself to be an effective therapeutic tool in the treatment of people coping with eating disorders and obesity. The introduction of non-judgmental attention in regards to one’s sensory experience, emotions and thought processes offers clients inner flexibility promoting emotion regulation and impulse control (Proulx 2008, Siegel 2007, Bear 2006, Kristeller 2006, 2003, 1999).

Mind-Body Awareness invites us to study the quality of our attention and at the same time we learn to be less reactive towards the content of our perceptions. While cultivating awareness we explore what we feel, think, and sense, as we would observe any phenomenon. We let our focus move between the different aspects of our experience and notice their interrelation. We try to be patient, flexible, and accepting at moments of stagnation, insecurity, and disorientation. And step by step we realize that we are centered and connected and we get access to a state of just being. We experience the body as the center of existence, not as a focus, but as a reference point of being in the world (Hutchinson 1994). In this state the focus can move freely and quietly. We talk of oscillating attention (Caldwell 1996) that moves back and forth.

The presentation will offer theoretical and practical introduction into:

- Five central aspects of mind- body awareness
- Emotion regulation in the context of eating disorders and obesity
- Clinical research projects about Mind-Body Awareness

The participants will experience the five central aspects of Mind-Body Awareness: oscillating of attention, connecting with sensation, moving towards acceptance, being present versus autopilot, cultivating witnessing. These five central aspects build the ground for the mindful eating exercises as they have been developed by Silvia Fiscalini in working with obese patients as well as for the explorations out of the therapy-book: Centered and Connected (Rytz 2009). We will invite the participants to gain experiential understanding and show how we transfer this into working with people coping with eating disorders and obesity; especially emphasizing how clients can apply their new understanding in emotionally charged situations.

We also speak about how we support our clients in using the five aspects in their daily life including dealing with habitual and compulsive patterns (eating, body checking, self-criticism). We need to understand that people who have trouble with emotional regulation - not only people living with eating disorders - have a sense that they are better at coping with stress when they do not focus on their body and mind, and therefore distract themselves by feeding their attention with strong impulses. We should realize that in such a situation cultivating Body-Mind Awareness is a challenging undertaking. Due acknowledgment and respect should be paid to the courage and inner strength that have to be summoned up in the process. An invitation to cultivate Mind-Body Awareness therefore needs to include the possibility of involving oneself in a less destructive manner than the addictive pattern offers. Inner dissonance and contradictions need to be welcomed as well. We need to improvise and invent constructive strategies for short-term stress regulation, which suit the situation and the person. Difficulties in fostering awareness should therefore not be interpreted as resistance but rather as protection and an invitation to look for alternative strategies that feel safer.

For this purpose it is crucial that during the course of Mind-Body Awareness therapy clients continuously practice between sessions. This way they learn to apply what they discovered as being meaningful in dealing with their individual situation. With the help of specifically designed worksheets, audio disks and picture cards they are empowered to take responsibility for their own journey of healing and to slowly develop trust into their own inner wisdom. We will include examples of these work materials as well as descriptions and drawings of experiences from our clients.

In our approach it is important to understand that there is no prescribed program which clients have to fulfill (be good at). However, cultivating the five aspects of Mind-Body Awareness asks for willingness and commitment to enter deeply into contact with oneself. Furthermore, it is essential that guidance given during therapy is not be based on the assumption, that people's experience of awareness is delightful and relaxing – it sometimes may be, but often it is just (hard) work. Guidance that exclusively suggests positive experiences can be limiting at best, or give rise to insecurity, guilt, or shame at worst. Clients who struggle with instructions suggesting that exploring awareness practices is relaxing, fun, and instantly healing may wonder what they are doing wrong if their experience is difficult and unpleasant, or worry that they are basically incapable of enjoying themselves or relaxing. In addition, concepts that explicitly promote ideals such as harmony, spaciousness, and wholeness can create enormous pressure to achieve them. Such instructions can easily and subtly promote an implicit ideal of perfection (Fiscalini, Rytz 2007).

Cultivating acceptance and flexibility embraces all aspects of life, including death. We can rarely choose what is going to happen. But we can learn to better attune to reality, to become more aware, to act with care. It is an ongoing process of self-development, for clients as well as for therapists and teachers. Cultivating a spacious and accepting inner attitude is essential. Part of the philosophy of Mind-Body Awareness is that people interested in teaching it or

integrating it into their therapeutic approach are asked to embody the principles themselves - thereby giving an adequate, non-verbal example of their inner convictions, which can only work if they themselves are committed to an ongoing learning process. We need to be patient with ourselves, because cultivating awareness and inner spaciousness needs time and practice. Then it can become a way of being.

We will briefly introduce our clinical research projects concerning Mind-Body Awareness as one treatment modality within an interdisciplinary treatment program for people suffering from eating disorders and obesity.

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