7

Core Mindfulness Skills

Mindfulness skills are central to DBT (hence the label "core" mindfulness skills). They are the first skills taught and are listed on the diary cards that clients fill out every week. These are the only skills that are highlighted the entire year; they are reviewed at the beginning of each of the other three skill modules. The skills are psychological and behavioral versions of meditation practices from Eastern spiritual training. I have drawn most heavily from the practice of Zen, but the skills are compatible with most Western contemplative and Eastern meditation practices.

In DBT, three primary states of mind are presented: "reasonable mind," "emotion mind," and "wise mind." A person is in "reasonable mind" when she is approaching knowledge intellectually, is thinking rationally and logically, attends to empirical facts, is planful in her behavior, focuses her attention, and is "cool" in her approach to problems. The person is in "emotion mind" when her thinking and behavior are controlled primarily by her current emotional state. In "emotion mind," cognitions are "hot"; reasonable, logical thinking is difficult; facts are amplified or distorted to be congruent with current affect; and the energy of behavior is also congruent with the current emotional state. "Wise mind" is the integration of "emotion mind" and "reasonable mind," as I have noted in Chapter 5 of this manual. It also and goes beyond them: "Wise mind" adds intuitive knowing to emotional experiencing and logical analysis.

Mindfulness skills are the vehicles for balancing "emotion mind" and "reasonable mind" to achieve "wise mind." There are three "what" skills (observing, describing, and participating) and three "how" skills (taking a nonjudgmental stance, focusing on one thing in the moment, and being effective).

Mindfulness "What" Skills

The mindfulness "what" skills include learning to observe, to describe, and to participate. The goal is to develop a lifestyle of participating with awareness; an assumption of DBT is that participation without awareness is a characteristic of impulsive and mood dependent behaviors. Generally, observing and describing one's own behavioral responses are only necessary when new behavior is being learned, there is some sort of problem, or a change is necessary. For example, beginning piano players pay close attention to the location of their hands and fingers, and may either count beats out loud or name the keys and chords they are playing. As skill improves, however, such observing and describing cease. But if a habitual mistake is made after a piece is learned, the player may have to revert to observing and describing until a new pattern has been learned. Learning to drive a stick-shift car, to dance, and to type are other familiar examples of this principle.

The first "what" skill is observing—that is, attending to events, emotions, and other behavioral responses, without *necessarily* trying to terminate them when painful or prolong them when pleasant. What the client learns here is to allow herself to experience with awareness, in the moment, whatever is happening, rather than leaving a situation or trying to terminate an emotion. Generally, the ability to attend to events requires a corresponding ability to step back from the event. Observing an event is separate or different from the event itself. Observing walking and walking are two different responses; observing thinking and thinking are two different responses; observing one's own heartbeat and the heart's beating are two different responses. This

focus on "experiencing the moment" is based on Eastern psychological approaches, as well as on Western notions of nonreinforced exposure as a method of extinguishing automatic avoidance and fear responses.

A second mindfulness "what" skill is that of describing events and personal responses in words. The ability to apply verbal labels to behavioral and environmental events is essential for both communication and self-control. Learning to describe requires that a person learn not to take emotions and thoughts literally—that is, as literal reflections of environmental events. For example, feeling afraid does not necessarily mean that a situation is threatening to life or welfare. Many people, including borderline individuals, confuse emotional responses with precipitating events. Physical components of fear ("I feel my stomach muscles tightening, my throat constricting") may be confused with perceptions of the environment ("I am starting an exam in school") to produce a dysfunctional thought ("I am going to fail the exam"). Thoughts are often taken literally; that is, thoughts ("I feel unloved") are confused with facts ("I am unloved"). One of the principal aims of cognitive therapy is to test the association of thoughts with their corresponding environmental events.

The third mindfulness "what" skill is the ability to participate without self-consciousness. A person who is participating is entering completely into the activities of the current moment, without separating herself from ongoing events and interactions. The quality of action is spontaneous; the interaction between the individual and the environment is smooth and based in some part on habit. Participating can, of course, be mindless. We have all had the experience of driving a complicated path to home as we concentrated on something else, arriving home without any awareness whatsoever of how we got there. But it can also be mindful. A good example of mindful participating is that of the skillful athlete who responds flexibly but smoothly to the demands of the task with alertness and awareness, but not with self-consciousness. Mindlessness is participating without attention to the task; mindfulness is participating with attention.

Mindfulness "How" Skills

The other three mindfulness skills have to do with *how* one attends, describes, and participates; they include taking a nonjudgmental stance, focusing on one thing in the moment, and being effective (doing what works). As taught in DBT, taking a nonjudgmental stance means just that—taking a nonevaluative approach, judging something as neither good nor bad. It does not mean going from a negative judgment to a positive judgment. Although borderline individuals tend to judge both themselves and others in either excessively positive terms (idealization) or excessively negative terms (devaluation), the position here is not that they should be more balanced in their judgments, but rather that judging should in most instances be dropped altogether. This is a very subtle point but a very important one. The problem with judging is that, for instance, a person who can be "worthwhile" can always become "worthless." Instead, DBT stresses a focus on the consequences of behavior and events. For example, a person's behavior may lead to painful consequences for herself or for others, or the outcome of events may be destructive. A nonjudgmental approach observes these consequences, and may suggest changing the behaviors or events, but would not necessarily add a label of "bad" to them.

Mindfulness in its totality has to do with the quality of awareness that a person brings to activities. The second "how" is to learn to focus the mind and awareness in the current moment's activity, rather than splitting attention among several activities or between a current activity and thinking about something else. Achieving such a focus requires control of attention, a capability that most borderline individuals lack. Often borderline clients are distracted by thoughts and images of the past, worries about the future, ruminative thoughts about troubles, or current negative moods. They are sometimes unable to put their troubles away and focus attention on the task at hand. When they do become involved in a task, their attention is often divided. This problem is readily observable in their difficulties in attending to skills training sessions. The clients need to learn how to focus their attention on one task or activity at a time, engaging in it with alertness, awareness, and wakefulness.

The third "how" goal, being effective, is directed at reducing the client's tendency at times to be more concerned with what is "right" than with doing what is actually needed or called for in a particular situation. Effectiveness is the opposite of "cutting off your nose to spite your face." As our clients often say, it is "playing the game" or "doing what works." From an Eastern meditation perspective, focusing on effectiveness is "using skillful means." The inability to let go of "being right" in favor of achieving goals is, of course, related to borderline individuals' experiences with invalidating environments. A central issue for many clients is whether they can indeed trust their own perceptions, judgments, and decisions—that is, whether they can expect their own actions to be correct or "right." However, taken to an extreme, an emphasis on principle over outcome can often result in the clients' being disappointed or alienating others. In the end, we all have to "give in" some of the time. Borderline clients at times find it much easier

MINDFULNESS HANDOUT 2

Taking Hold of Your Mind: "What" Skills

OBSERVE

- JUST NOTICE THE EXPERIENCE. Notice without getting caught in the experience. Experience without reacting to your experience.
- Have a "TEFLON MIND," letting experiences, feelings, and thoughts come into your mind and slip right out.
- CONTROL your attention, but not what you see. Push away nothing. Cling to nothing.
- Be like a guard at the palace gate, ALERT to every thought, feeling, and action that comes through the gate of your mind.
- Step inside yourself and observe. WATCH your thoughts coming and going, like clouds in the sky. Notice each feeling, rising and falling, like waves in the ocean. Notice exactly what you are doing.
- Notice what comes through your SENSES—your eyes, ears, nose, skin, tongue. See others' actions and expressions. "Smell the roses."

DESCRIBE

- PUT WORDS ON THE EXPERIENCE. When a feeling or thought arises, or you do something, acknowledge it. For example, say in your mind, "Sadness has just enveloped me." . . . or . . . "Stomach muscles tightnening" . . . or . . . "A thought 'I can't do this' has come into my mind." . . . or . . . "walking, step, step, step. . . . "
- PUT EXPERIENCES INTO WORDS. Describe to yourself what is happening. Put a name on your feelings. Call a thought just a thought, a feeling just a feeling. Don't get caught in content.

PARTICIPATE

- Enter into your experiences. Let yourself get involved in the moment, letting go of ruminating. BECOME ONE WITH YOUR EXPERIENCE, COMPLETELY FORGETTING YOURSELF.
- ACT INTUITIVELY from wise mind. Do just what is needed in each situation—a skillful dancer on the dance floor, one with the music and your partner, neither willful nor sitting on your hands.
- Actively PRACTICE your skills as you learn them until they become part of you, where you use them without self-consciousness. PRACTICE:

  1. Changing harmful situations.
  2. Changing your harmful reactions to situations.
  3. Accepting yourself and the situation as they are.

From *Skills Training Manual for Treating Borderline Personality Disorder* by Marsha Linehan. ©1993 The Guilford Press.

MINDFULNESS HANDOUT 3

Taking Hold of Your Mind: "How" Skills

NON-JUDGMENTALLY

- See but DON'T EVALUATE. Take a nonjudgmental stance. Just the facts. Focus on the "what," not the "good" or "bad," the "terrible" or "wonderful," the "should" or "should not."
- UNGLUE YOUR OPINIONS from the facts, from the "who, what, when, and where."
- ACCEPT each moment, each event as a blanket spread out on the lawn accepts both the rain and the sun, each leaf that falls upon it.
- ACKNOWLEDGE the helpful, the wholesome, but don't judge it. Acknowledge the harmful, the unwholesome, but don't judge it.
- When you find yourself judging, DON'T JUDGE YOUR JUDGING.

ONE-MINDFULLY

- DO ONE THING AT A TIME. When you are eating, eat. When you are walking, walk. When you are bathing, bathe. When you are working, work. When you are in a group, or a conversation, focus your attention on the very moment you are in with the other person. When you are thinking, think. When you are worrying, worry. When you are planning, plan. When you are remembering, remember. Do each thing with all of your attention.
- If other actions, or other thoughts, or strong feelings distract you, LET GO OF DISTRACTIONS and go back to what you are doing—again, and again, and again.
- CONCENTRATE YOUR MIND. If you find you are doing two things at once, stop and go back to one thing at a time.

EFFECTIVELY

- FOCUS ON WHAT WORKS. Do what needs to be done in each situation. Stay away from "fair" and "unfair," "right" and "wrong," "should" and "should not."
- PLAY BY THE RULES. Don't "cut off your nose to spite your face."
- Act as SKILLFULLY as you can, meeting the needs of the situation you are in. Not the situation you wish you were in; not the one that is just; not the one that is more comfortable; not the one that. . . .
- Keep an eye on YOUR OBJECTIVES in the situation and do what is necessary to achieve them.
- LET GO of vengeance, useless anger, and righteousness that hurts you and doesn't work.

From *Skills Training Manual for Treating Borderline Disorder Personality* by Marsha Linehan. ©1993 The Guilford Press.