The Mindful SLP

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Did I remember my lunch? Did I phone that family back? How am I going to finish all of those reports? I'm sure I'm forgetting something...

These are some of the thoughts that filter through my brain on a regular basis. If you’re anything like me, balancing a career as a speech-language pathologist with the rest of life’s demands can feel, at times, exhilarating, and at others, overwhelming. While stress can facilitate growth, and can lead to productivity (Beck & Verticchio, 2014a), too much stress, or chronic stress can lead to several negative outcomes. Too much stress can inhibit productivity and our overall attitude (Beck et al, 2017). One way to reduce stress is to practice mindfulness.

You may have heard of mindfulness; it is a buzzword that is cropping up everywhere. The reason it is so popular is because practicing mindfulness has a wide array of benefits. In this article, we will discuss what this term really means and how it can support us in our daily lives and our clinical work.

What is mindfulness?

Mindfulness is “…moment-to-moment awareness. It is cultivated by purposely paying attention to things we ordinarily never give a moment’s thought to” (Kabat-Zinn, 1990, p. 2). There are many ways to learn mindfulness, but some common practices involve meditation, yoga or by deliberately paying attention to automatic tasks like eating or tooth brushing (Beck and Verticchio, 2014b). Part of being mindful involves being non-judgmental and non-reactive, which frees us up so we can focus on the situation at hand, whether that is personal or professional.

What does research say about the benefits of mindfulness?

There are many benefits associated with mindfulness. A recent study compared two groups of Speech-Language Pathology students (Beck et al, 2017). The experimental group received eight twenty-minute mindfulness practice sessions. The sessions consisted of five minutes of stretching, five minutes of breath work, where participants focused on their breathing, two minutes of journaling, and a five-minute presentation on topics such as the definition of mindfulness, the mind-body relationship, the importance of breath, and self-compassion. The groups completed measures before and after the weekly sessions. The experimental group demonstrated:

1. A decrease in stress - the study showed that the experimental participants’ perceived levels of stress and biological markers of stress had decreased in comparison to the control group. That means that not only did the experimental group feel less stress, their bodies were demonstrating signs of decreased stress.
2. **An increase in self-compassion** - Self-compassion means showing kindness to oneself, even when facing mistakes or failure. Self-compassion has been associated with "emotional resilience, greater levels of emotional intelligence, and decreased anxiety and depression" (Beck et al., 2017, p. 895). The authors of this study measured this construct using The Self-Compassion Scale, or SCS (Neff, 2003) and found that students in the experimental group had a significant increase in their scores on this measure.

3. **A decrease in the negative aspects of perfectionism** - Perfectionism is a tendency to set extremely high standards for oneself, which is not necessarily a bad thing. The problem arises when individuals do not feel that they are equipped to meet these standards. In this study, participants in the experimental group were more confident that they could achieve the high standards they set for themselves (Beck et al., 2017). This study demonstrated that a relatively short mindfulness practice can support us in our daily lives by decreasing our stress and helping us express more self-compassion and be less perfectionistic (Beck, 2017).

### Mindfulness and Clinical Work

In our clinical work, mindfulness is a foundational skill that can support our interactions with the families on our caseloads. When working with young children, a large part of our role involves building rapport, connecting, coaching and counseling their parents. In order to be effective at this element of our work, we need to be able to stay focused on our clients, which is the goal of mindfulness. In reference to counselling in speech-language pathology, Riley (2002) states that, "The clinician needs to be self-aware. Awareness of one’s own distractions and prejudices is essential in order to put them aside and be fully ‘present,’ emotionally and mentally, with the client" (p.7).

Mindfulness has been linked to several interactive clinical strategies:

1. **Active listening** – paying attention to the clients’ verbal and nonverbal messages is an essential component of our clinical work (Beck and Verticchio, 2014b; Davis and Hayes, 2011). This skill is practically impossible without mindfulness because, in order to truly listen to our clients, we need to let go of our agendas or where we’re hoping the conversation will go. This is difficult, but when we truly understand where a parent or educator is coming from, we are in a much better position to reflect, guide and support them as we work together.

   This is also true in relation to interactions with children. The foundational strategy of all Hanen Programs is OWL™, or Observe, Wait and Listen™. The reason we start with this strategy is because it is only when the adult focuses entirely on the child to give him or her a chance to initiate, that the adult can respond contingently, which we know accelerates language development. When we OWL™, we are laying the foundation for a mindful interaction, in which we let go of how we think an activity should go.

2. **Emotional regulation** – this involves being able to stay calm, even in the face of difficult situations (Davis and Hayes, 2011). Emotional regulation is a useful skill, whether we are working with parents or children. Our ability to control our own emotions means that we can help diffuse, rather than intensify emotional situations. When we are able to stay calm, we can actually help regulate the behaviour of the parent or child who we are working with (Binns, Hutchinson, and Cardy, 2019). However, in order to do that, we have to be able to read the other person’s emotional cues, and “adjust our own actions and intentions in response to the partner” (Binns et al., 2019, p.2). This requires us to be mindful, to take the time to understand the other person’s emotional state and to respond thoughtfully and intentionally.

3. **Emotional resonance** – this involves being able to understand and empathize with a client’s emotions without experiencing them for ourselves or avoiding them because they seem too difficult (Beck and Verticchio, 2014b). This skill helps us create emotional boundaries which may help us to avoid burn out and to feel more confident when working with difficult clients or engaging in difficult conversations.

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Becoming Mindful

There are many ways to develop mindfulness – there are apps and courses devoted to teaching this skill. Because at its core, mindfulness is about paying attention to what’s happening in the moment, many people look to yoga, meditation, and breath-work to develop this skill (Beck et al, 2017).

Conclusion

Not only can developing mindfulness decrease stress, it can also help support the work we do with families and can increase our capacity as clinicians. Being mindful helps us focus on our clients and respond with warmth and compassion, which is at the heart of the work we do.
References


About The Hanen Centre

Founded in 1975, The Hanen Centre is a Canadian not-for-profit charitable organization with a global reach. Its mission is to provide parents, caregivers, early childhood educators and speech-language pathologists with the knowledge and training they need to help young children develop the best possible language, social and literacy skills. This includes children who have or are at risk for language delays, those with developmental challenges such as autism, and those who are developing typically.

For more information, please visit www.hanen.org.

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