

# Mindfulness Based Trauma Counselling (MBTC)

Opening to our Wisdom & Compassion

Susan Harris & Billee Laskin

# What is MBTC

- MBTC is a group program that synthesizes mindfulness meditation and trauma informed counselling
- This approach is based on a systemic understanding of the dynamics and impacts of abuse and trauma which includes the multitude of factors shaping the experience: gender, class, race, culture, ability and other social experiences
- MBTC facilitation requires a regular mindfulness practice and well-developed group facilitation skills.

# What is Mindfulness

- Mindfulness is moment to moment awareness, a practice that invites you simply to notice what is passing through your awareness.
- It is a particular way of paying attention. Mindfulness is the process of observing body, heart and mind intentionally, of letting your experiences unfold from moment to moment and accepting them as they are. (Kabat Zinn)
- Mindfulness does not involve rejecting thoughts, feelings, sensations, nor trying to suppress or control them. Mindfulness involves being with what is in the present moment with compassionate acceptance.

# Two Wings of a Bird

- Mindfulness is both a practice of awareness and a practice of compassion, acceptance and non-judgment.
- On this path wisdom and compassion work together: seeing things as they are happens through the lens of compassionate acceptance.
- Wisdom and compassion are described as the two wings of the practice: without either one of the wings, the bird is unable to fly.

# All human beings possess the capacity for accurate reflection

- We are able to be aware of our experiences as we go about our lives. This capacity requires us to wake up, to be in contact with what is happening as it happens.
- Waking up can transform us as we become aware of habitual patterns, judgments and expectations.
- Waking up can also be scary as we must face what is painful as well. It takes courage to welcome what ever arises in our experience.

# What the mind knows as awareness the heart knows as love

- To truly be aware, to stay open and present to our experience, necessitates its acceptance from a stance of loving kindness and compassion cultivated through the practice.
- As we learn to turn toward our suffering, initially this may feel worse. As our practice deepens we learn to breathe and stay present with what is difficult.
- Practicing mindfulness helps us discover a deeper sense of steadiness and harmony within. Bringing open hearted acceptance to our experience promotes deep healing.

# Why bring mindfulness to the experience of abuse and trauma

- Trauma and abuse impact in disconnecting and disempowering ways.
- Adaptations and responses women develop throughout their lives as a consequence of chronic abuse affect all dimensions of being including: emotions, attention or consciousness, self perception, relationships, systems of meaning and somatization.
- In its support of moment to moment awareness, mindfulness practice cultivates connection. Mindfulness supports compassionately witnessing and befriending whatever arises (sensations, emotions, thoughts).
- Over time this strengthens the ability to be with what arises and not get lost in the experience.
- With mindfulness we begin to see the ways we identify with thoughts, feelings, stories and beliefs. This supports the loosening of the grip of these identifications that undermine us.
- Through increased awareness of these internalized trauma patterns, mindfulness builds one's capacity for responsiveness and choice, diminishing reactivity.

# MBTC involves:

- Teaching wisdom and compassion practices of mindfulness
- Supporting group members to be with the direct experience of what is with non-judging awareness and compassionate acceptance
- Applying mindfulness skills in the moment to trauma impacts that are arising
- Making the links between experience arising and the trauma story
- Creating new affective experience through normalizing and validating what is arising with compassionate acceptance
- Supporting opening to new ways of understanding and being with experience

# Therapeutic Applications of Mindfulness

- Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction: Jon Kabat Zinn: 8-10 week course applied to chronic pain and stress reactions.
- Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy: Zindel Segal: 8 week course adapted from MBSR applied to prevention of reoccurrence of depression.
- Mindfulness Based Trauma Counselling: Susan Harris and Billee Laskin bring the skills and the stance of mindfulness to work with trauma survivors.
- Approaches incorporating Mindfulness:
  - Substance Abuse: Marlatt and Gordon, and Miller and Guidry use mindfulness to prevent relapse.
  - Dialectic Behavioral Therapy: Marsha Linehan uses mindfulness in a skills based way to help clients with a BPD diagnosis work with acceptance.

# Mindfulness and the Brain

- For over 10 years, Richard Davidson, a Harvard trained neuroscientist, has been studying the impacts of the practice of mindfulness on the brain using brain scanning technology.
- Subjects have ranged from very experienced meditators, Buddhist monks, to Western practitioners of Kabat Zinn's MSBR program.
- Results are demonstrating:
  - Increased activation in the left prefrontal cortex, an area of the brain associated with positive mood
  - Enhanced immune system response

# Mindfulness and Secure Attachment

- Siegel (2007) in "The Mindful Brain" hypothesizes that mindfulness is a process of internal attunement that forms a secure self-relationship.
- This internal attunement promotes neural integration in the brain impacting the same brain structures that are developed by a secure attachment with a care giver.

# MBTC research findings

- Participants showed significant improvements in mindfulness as well as social support and self-esteem. Participants' depression scores also decreased significantly.
- Results also found that participants had improved scores on the measures of ability to identify and communicate subjective feelings as well as the individual's response to distress.

# In the Words of Women

- "I feel very equipped/able to live with the trauma I have experienced. I feel as though I have shifted from wanting to "fix me" to a place of acceptance. The attitude, stance of acceptance, is accessible through mindfulness."
- "It was the most therapy work I have done around childhood incest. It gave me a place to hold the unacceptable and a safety in going gently into the profound depths of pain to heal."
- "More than helpful, mindfulness is teaching me how to live, what is life, what is healthy, how to go about my days one moment at a time."
- "It was very helpful to look at the mind body connection as one. It helped to learn to see the areas of trauma we experienced and watch the thoughts pass through rather than cling to them, to be more accepting and compassionate to our traumatic memories and not hard on ourselves."