
Mindfulness-Based Approaches for Children and Youth



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Mindfulness meditation is a useful adjunct to behavioral and medical interventions to manage a range of symptoms, including psychological and physical responses to stress, anxiety, depression, and disruptive behavior. Mindfulness approaches can be taught to children, adolescents, and their parents to improve self-regulation, particularly in response to stress. Mindfulness may be particularly relevant for youth and families who have an increased risk for exposure to chronic stress and unique stressors associated with medical and/or social-contextual

considerations. Moreover, mindfulness parenting techniques can augment traditional behavioral approaches to improve children's behavior through specific parent-child interactions. A growing body of empirical studies and clinical experience suggest that incorporating mindfulness practices will enable clinicians to more effectively treat youth and their families in coping optimally with a range of challenging symptoms.

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Introduction

Many youth and their families are at risk of experiencing stressors that may lead to maladaptive coping strategies to manage negative affective experiences. And ethnic minority youth are disproportionately exposed to a range of stressors.¹ Although emotion regulation and coping may protect youth by reducing the impact of negative stressors, continued exposure to stressors may overload their coping resources. Significant, recurrent and/or ongoing stress may contribute to toxic stress, in which an individual's ability to manage or cope with stress is overwhelmed.² Increasingly, there are calls for broader thinking about how to treat toxic stress. Pediatricians have been called to understand the complex and intertwined systems that are disrupted by stress,³ as well as

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to recognize that effective health approaches to mitigate the negative effects of toxic stress and trauma may occur in the community, not only in medical settings.⁴

Mindfulness has been described as "paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally."⁵ In essence, mindfulness is the complete, nonjudgmental awareness of what is happening right now. Mindfulness instruction is intended

to enhance an individual's innate ability to be aware of what is happening internally and externally with open curiosity and without judgment. Mindfulness interventions are theorized to target regulation of emotion and coping processes associated with stress,⁶ and may represent a helpful branch of psychotherapies to address the suffering experienced by stressed youth.

Formal mindfulness instruction entails a range of techniques that help foster an intentional focusing of attention on one's present-moment experience while letting go of negative, self-critical judgments. This type of training aims to help individuals accept unpleasant and painful experiences without reactively attempting to change the experience. As moment-to-moment awareness through the day is the ultimate goal of mindfulness programs, there is also instruction of informal techniques that can be used at any time. As most of us would prefer to reduce or eliminate pain and discomfort as much as possible, some

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mindfulness-based programs additionally adopt a dialectical position of balancing desire for change alongside intentional acceptance of the inevitability of suffering.⁷

The application of mindfulness meditation to reduce suffering has been a feature of behavioral medicine in the West for well over 30 years.⁸ Meditation practices complement a group of established psychological approaches to reduce stress and discomfort,⁹ including cognitive-behavioral therapies and relaxation techniques. Mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) is one of the more well-known programs, which initially was developed for use with adults presenting with chronic pain, and other chronic and stressful conditions.⁸ The common thread among these other approaches is a dual emphasis on mindfulness and behavioral change as core processes to alleviate suffering. In this article, we will review the literatures pertaining to coping with stressors among youth, the role of stress exposure/experience in regulation and coping; and highlight the role of mindfulness-based therapies to improve self-regulation among youth.

Review of Literature

Role of Stress Exposure in Youth

Stressors experienced in childhood and adolescence have been linked to a number of negative mental health outcomes, including internalizing problems, externalizing behaviors, academic difficulties, and health risk behaviors.^{10,11} Further, a number of cross-ethnic comparison studies suggest that ethnic minority youth experience more stressors than their non-minority

peers.¹² Minority youth are more likely to experience the death of a loved one, to have a family member who has been arrested or jailed, to have to take care of a loved one, and to be placed in a foster home.¹³ However, the effects of stress on coping and psychological functioning are important for all youth. Thus, interventions that enhance children's and adolescents' abilities to cope effectively with inevitable stress may provide a protective effect.

Effects of Mindfulness on Self-Regulation

Empirical interest in the potential theoretical mechanisms of mindfulness-based treatments has grown significantly since the initial introduction of mindfulness into psychotherapy. Mindfulness has been broadly theorized to improve the self-regulation of emotions, behavior, and cognitive processes,¹⁴ emerging from increased acceptance and self-awareness, such as noticing unpleasant emotions and distress as experiences that can be accepted, rather than impulsively reacted to, ruminated over, or chronically avoided.^{9,15,16} This enhanced acceptance of one's internal experiences is thought to lead to reduced suffering and distress in response to stress. Mindfulness approaches emphasize approaching and accepting one's experiences, rather than chronic efforts in avoiding uncomfortable or undesired experiences.¹⁷ Our theoretical model (Fig) reflects the range of potential changes associated with mindfulness instruction, including the intertwined self-regulatory processes of improved coping, positive cognitive changes, and improved psychological functioning.⁶

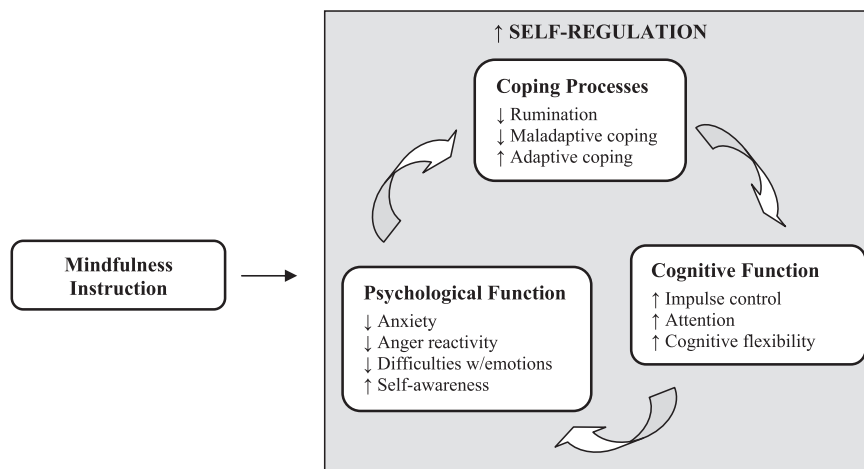


FIG. Mindfulness instruction and improved self-regulation. Previously published in: *Functional Symptoms in Pediatric Disease*, Ran D. Anbar editor. 2014. Springer, New York, p. 350.

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