

FERRIS STATE UNIVERSITY

PERSONAL COUNSELING CENTER

Pay Attention!

Hello Everyone,

I hope this newsletter finds you well. Happy week 8 of quarantine? At this point what is time really? Apparently, Michigan heard my complaints last week and decided to give us some real spring weather. I certainly hope you all are taking advantage of it. I am sure most of you have already heard the governor has again extended the stay at home order until May 15th. I liked someone's post online the other day that said if we don't behave, our parents are going to take our whole summer away. Here is hoping that doesn't happen. Kudos to all of you adhering to the stay at home order. I guess Michigan has been one of the best states for following social distancing guidelines. I am sure our medical community is thankful for that.

This week I wanted to talk about mindfulness. If you have ever done clinical work with me, sooner or later I am going to annoy you with the idea of mindfulness. "I want you to be mindful of X....." "Be mindful of your emotions" "Be mindful when this happens", "Have you ever thought about meditating?" I thought there is no better way to bug you about mindfulness than via newsletter. This week I wanted to introduce a basic mindfulness practice that you can utilize as well as talk about some of surprising benefits of the practice itself.

Mindfulness (meditation) comes out of the Buddhist tradition. To summarize; our depression comes from fixating and judging our past selves and choices. Anxiety happens when we worry and focus on the future and what we can't control. We find peace (and better emotional regulation) when we can train our minds to focus on the present moment. We can't change the past, we can't control the future, we can only be present in the now.

So what would a mindfulness meditation exercise look like? I will include a number of YouTube tutorials as this will be tough to walk through in a newsletter. There are two basic approaches I wanted to go over. The first is a very basic, bringing your attention to your breath. Find someplace comfortable to either sit or lay down. Start taking deep, intentional breaths through your nose or mouth. Bring your full focus on the sensation of breathing. How does it feel when your chest goes up and down? What is the sensation of the breath entering and leaving your body? Allow yourself to be fully present trying to focus (thinking) only about your breath. When you notice your thoughts drifting to other things (and they will), gently guide your mind back to the breathing. Full disclosure, if you have never done this before you will find it challenging. This is an exercise and is something that you need to practice to get better at. If this is the first time you have ever tried mindfulness meditation, you may have a hard time keeping your mind focused on the moment. Keep at it!

The other exercise is mindfulness you can do while walking. As you walk around (hopefully outside) bring your attention to your senses in nature. What are you seeing? Hearing? Smelling? How does the air feel on your skin? Allow yourself to notice the details of things around you. How many leaves are on that tree? How many flowers do you see in the field? Again, the goal is to bring your attention outside of your thoughts and into the moment. Be fully present with the nature around you.

So why do this? In general, we spend too much time in our heads and/or buried in our phones. The consequence of this is we lose touch with our physical and emotional self. This causes us to become emotionally dysregulated and harms the connection between our physical and mental self. Training your brain to be more attuned with the present is not necessarily meant to make your anxiety symptoms go away. It helps you be present and accept them. It changes the relationship you have with the experience. No one enjoys anxiety, but you can take away the emotion's power over you. It helps us integrate all our emotions holistically with the body and once we can do that, our brains regulate the emotions better. You won't experience symptoms of being anxious/depressed/stressed/scared as long.

If you have ever heard me say "I want you to be mindful of X this week" what I mean is I want you to pay attention to it. What happens when you increase your attention and awareness of your thoughts or feelings? When we look at automatic thoughts, if you can become more aware of what they are and when they happen, you can intervene in that moment. Some other awesome benefits that may surprise you: increase body satisfaction (awesome), reduce implicit age and race bias (study done at CMU!), reduce cognitive decline (probably more important when you are older), improve immune response (seems timely), and reduce psychological pain! [Source](#), [Next Source](#), and [last source](#).

Here are some great resources if you are interested in trying out this new skill. From Daily Calm, here is a couple ten minute exercises [Here](#) and [Here](#). This is a five minute exercise that you can do anywhere [Here](#). I know these people sound like yoga instructors and this may feel awkward, I encourage you to push yourself out of your comfort zone and try something new. A good way to notice change is take a mental snapshot of yourself (how you are feeling emotionally and physically) before a video and compare it to how you feel after. [Here](#) is a TedTalk about how mindfulness can help with pain, happiness, and life satisfaction. Finally, if this is something you click with, there are a ton of apps on Android and IOS (both paid and free) that you should check out.

Your homework this week is to try mindfulness at least twice. Use the videos above or do your own thing but give this new approach a fair shot. We all know we have no where else to be, and not much else to do. See if it improves your sleep. See if it improves your mood. Who knows? It could improve a lot of things.

Take care of yourself and wash your hands,

Andy