

Mindfulness and its relevance to stammering

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Who am I?

I am a specialist fluency therapist and I have also qualified as a mindfulness teacher.

What is mindfulness?

“Mindfulness means paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment and non-judgementally”

Kabat-Zinn, 1994

Mindfulness based approaches have two main aims:

- a. To increase the quality of life for anyone – you don't have to have a particular problem to benefit!
- b. To help with specific difficulties e.g. depression, anxiety, stammering

Mindfulness practices are meditation/awareness practices. Mindfulness can be cultivated through formal meditation and through becoming more mindful of daily activities e.g. taking a shower mindfully. There is now a strong evidence base demonstrating the efficacy of mindfulness based approaches (Baer, 2005).

Mindfulness is a counterintuitive, non-goal orientated approach that is not about fixing. Manning (2004) describes the power of working with counter intuitive strategies when working with PWS. Kabat-Zinn, 2005 describes mindfulness meditation practices as a *“radical non-doing, inviting a counter-intuitive inward stance of acceptance and opening rather than fixing or problem solving”*. Desensitisation programmes recognise the importance of PWS allowing themselves to stammer more openly, to increase the approach as opposed to the avoidance gradient (Sheehan, 1970; Van Riper, 1971). This is often worked on in behavioural ways. Mindfulness practices can help give the ‘means whereby’ people can start to open up to their experience in non-striving, non-behavioural ways.

Mindfulness based approaches aim to:

- develop insight and awareness
- increase the possibility of choice through responding mindfully rather than reacting automatically
- cultivate acceptance
- increase kindness and compassion towards self
- increase the possibility of experiencing calm

Mindfulness based approaches have their effects through:

- increased awareness leading to making choices to respond rather than reacting on autopilot
- the paradox of change coming about through 'letting be' rather than trying to fix
- encouraging approaching and opening up to difficult experience which can reduce the reactive pattern of tensing which triggers negative cycles of thoughts, feelings and behaviours
- disengaging from rumination and habituated negative thinking patterns

Relevance of mindfulness for stammering

- cultivation of acceptance (not the same as resignation)
- means whereby people can develop greater opening up to difficulty – relevance to desensitisation
- cultivation of non-judgemental awareness of thoughts, feelings and behaviours
- increased awareness of the body – getting out of the head and coming to the present moment
- increasing the ability to ‘respond’ rather than ‘react’ can facilitate use of speech therapy techniques
- stress management/relaxation benefits

Segal et al (2002) in their report on mindfulness work with people who are depressed say *“it is the continued attempts to escape or avoid unhappiness, or to achieve happiness that keep the negative cycles turning”*. In relation to stammering therapy we could change this to *“it is the continued attempts to escape or avoid stammering, or to achieve fluency that keep the negative cycles turning”* and the quote will still make sense.

Doing mind and being mind

We spend a lot of our lives 'doing' and whilst this can be very helpful for certain aspects of our experience it is less useful for dealing with emotions and thoughts. Through mindfulness practices we cultivate the 'being' mind. Why might this be relevant to stammering?

- many PWS believe they have to 'do' and 'try harder' in order to change – the variability of stammering feeds this belief
- speech therapy can collude with this belief
- often 'doing' and 'trying harder' increase stammering difficulties.
- techniques can be most helpful if approached in an 'allowing' versus 'trying to control' mode

How I have integrated mindfulness work into our programme for PWS

- a. through introducing short mindfulness practices into mainstream speech therapy courses
- b. through developing a mindfulness based cognitive therapy (MBCT) course for PWS

Some quotes from clients who have completed the MBCT course:

“I can focus on one thing at a time now which reduces the levels of stress in my head – this has had a positive effect on my speech. I am just calmer all round”

“It has helped me to remain calm within myself and focus on the moment and not dwell on habitual negative thoughts”

“It helped me with the moment of stammering and seemed to enable me to slow my rate of speech down”

“I have a greater acceptance of myself. Some existing conclusions, thoughts are now seen in a different way. New perceptions are forming that have a truth and integrity about them. I have a greater awareness and greater clarity.”

“am more able to ‘catch’ stammering moments and choose how to manage them rather than trying to push through”

“...I find it easier to accept my stammer as part of me – I feel whole and don’t feel I am dragging my stammer around like a troublesome appendage”

“I am kinder to myself”

Training for Speech & Language Therapists

So far six training workshops on mindfulness for speech and language therapists have been delivered in the UK. They have all received excellent feedback. In addition to the professional application, the workshops can deliver personal benefits in relation to stress management. There are currently proposals to offer the training in South Africa and we would be happy to consider invitations from other countries if there is interest.

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