

## Contemplative Psychotherapy with Adolescents

In my work with adolescents I'm finding a greater and greater prevalence of anxiety among the students in middle and high school. Anxieties ranging from debilitating test anxiety, social anxieties and more generalized anxiety plague adolescent students, both male and female. Currently, most of my work is done as a volunteer in a local school, providing brief weekly check-ins with students who, for the most part, also see a counselor outside of the school setting.

In the school setting I see my role as augmenting the therapeutic relationship and interventions happening outside of the 20-minute sessions I have with them. In my time with these students, my primary goal is to offer an invitation back into the present moment. Students who describe symptoms of anxiety are often spending a great deal of time lost in the future. By offering students simple mindfulness and meditation techniques they can begin to anchor themselves in the here and now rather than getting caught up in the potentialities of the future.

The use of mindfulness in addressing anxiety is growing in its popularity and a broad range of therapies, from Dialectical Behavioral Therapy to Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy, make use of mindfulness and even meditations in order to support clients in regaining a sense of wellbeing and reducing symptoms of depression, anxiety, pain, and other experiences of suffering. Of course, therapists vary in how they make use of mindfulness. Some use mindfulness in order to support and inform their own understanding of the world and to shape their presence with their clients (an implicit use), others bring mindfulness or meditation into the sessions, while others use theories that are based in principles of mindfulness to treat clients (explicit use). Contemplative Psychotherapy is a therapeutic approach in which mindfulness is deeply woven into the work and thinking of the therapist, and for which principles and ethics grounded in Buddhist thought are central.

Contemplative Psychotherapy is based in a foundational belief in the essential goodness of each person. Described as "brilliant sanity", therapists who embrace contemplative principles believe that the very nature of every person is one of compassion, wisdom and clarity, and wholeness. This nature can be obscured by negative experiences, or unhelpful patterns of behaving, thinking and feeling, but for the contemplative therapist this essential nature is always present and always undiminished and untarnished. If we look and listen carefully to each client we can glimpse this brilliant sanity in the same way that the whole city can be illuminated in a flash of lightning in the still and dark night.

### **Five Competencies.**

Wegela, in her brand new book, "Contemplative Psychotherapy Essentials: Enriching your Practice with Buddhist Psychology", describes five central

competencies of the contemplative psychotherapist that should feel familiar to all counselors:

1) Being present and letting be. This first competency translates to a prizing of the present moment and a capacity to allow what is to be present and to emerge fully.

2) Seeing clearly and not judging. In seeing clearly the therapist is careful to use the diagnostic process as a communication tool and not as an avenue for defining clients. Seeing clearly also means that a therapist is mindful of the processes of transference and countertransference within the counseling relationship.

3) Recognizing and appreciating differences. The contemplative psychotherapist embraces cultural competency and appreciates the dynamics of cultural and religious differences even while understanding the fundamental interconnectedness of all people.

4) Connecting with others and cultivating relationship. Here we are challenged to understand and work through our own obstacles to connectedness and to build healthy relationships with our clients.

5) Acting skillfully and letting go. Finally, skillful action, also known as skillful means, is the balance between seeing clearly what is needed in order to help move a client closer to his or her own brilliant sanity and taking action through intervention. As Wegala points out, seeing clearly what is needed but not taking action or acting without first seeing clearly will not support a client's progress. A key piece of seeing clearly is knowing when an intervention is not being helpful and being able to let go of that intervention.

### **Case Conceptualization in Contemplative Psychotherapy**

The contemplative approach to case conceptualization is one that incorporates the body, speech and mind triad. Body conceptualizations captures clients' physicality their experience of the physical environments in which they inhabit. Traits, such as body type, ethnicity and race, physical ability and disability, are examined in order to understand clients more deeply. Also important to understanding clients are aspects of what are categorized as speech but include not only language and the pace, energy and quality of speech but also the qualities of relationships with others and the patterns within those relationships. Finally, the content of clients' thoughts are explored as well as their relationship to those thoughts. The bright or dull nature of the thinking, patterns of thought, both helpful and those that lead to suffering and the patterns of bias. Again, though not entirely ignored, less emphasis is placed on pathologies than is often true of other forms of case conceptualization.

### **Simple Breath Meditations for Teens.**

Teens who experience significant anxiety while in the school setting need tools that can readily offer support in restoring a sense of presence and calm within their own bodies, both for wellbeing as well as for the possibility for learning and connection to others. Many counselors are making use of mindfulness and meditation within

schools to support students who experience anxiety but some meditations can do more than simply reduce immediate symptom sets. When I work with students I encourage them to try to remember to make use of mindful breathing every day, at least three intentional breaths, in order to begin to build habits for centered presence which students can then draw upon later when they feel challenged. I also collaborate with parents, particularly when they have a good relationship with their children and their children appreciate the support they offer. In these types of relationships a shared language for identifying and working with difficult feelings can be very helpful.

### **Simple Breath Meditation.**

A simple set of approaches that teens can use that can go largely unnoticed by their classmates and teachers are breath meditations. If seated students can place their feet squarely on the ground and their right hand on the right thigh. On the in-breath and the short pause that follows, the student should focus on the sensations in the right hand, noting any subtleties at all. On the exhale the student should shift attention to the nostrils, and maintain focus there through the pause that follows the out-breath. Three natural breaths should begin to restore a feeling of centered calm if the anxiety arising is noticed while it is still mild.

### **For times when thoughts are racing.**

At times it can be difficult to settle into the breath because worrisome thoughts are racing through the mind. At these times students can add a counting procedure that is rather complex but it is in the complexity that the mind is helped to settle. First students are invited to take a comfortable and stable posture. On the first in-breath the student counts "one" and then after the natural pause allows for an exhale. On the next in-breath, again the student counts "one". However, on the next in-breath, she would count "two". On the next in-breath the student counts, "one", then "two" then "three". If you are seeing the pattern here, you may have guessed that the next in-breath is counted as "one" and the breaths are counted to "four". This is a very calming and focusing meditation practice. If students are at home they can continue this sequence to eight and then begin to go backward again, however, in school counting in this way to "three" and then backward is usually enough to feel centered and calm.

### **Helping students to shift how they value certain thoughts and emotions.**

Part of what is helping to sustain anxiety is a tendency to over-value anxious thoughts, feelings or sensations. Two practices can be very helpful with this.

*Touch and Go.* With touch and go, students are encouraged to allow only enough time and space to "touch" a feeling and then, rather than clinging to it, running from it, or pushing it away, to simply allow it to go of its own accord. We are reminded that nothing is permanent, most especially thoughts and feelings. Here we make note of the way the feeling shifts, as clouds do in the sky, taking one shape, then another and then slowly dissipating. Wegala invites her readers to feel the

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feeling for about as long as it would take to recognize a food only from its flavor, and then to allow the feeling to go.

*In and Out.* In this meditation your student shifts focus from the breath to some object outside of the body. Many students find it helpful to focus on the breath for three to five breaths and then some object on their desks for three to five breaths and then back on the breath. When focusing on the outside object the instruction is to touch the object very softly with the eyes, as if holding a bubble with a feather. Alternatively, students can choose to focus on the sounds in the room (or the silence) as their external object. Moving back and forth from the internal to the external experience supports students in understanding that they have some efficacy over what they experience, and to some degree, how it is experienced. Many students find this exercise particularly helpful.

Karen Kissel Wegela of the Naropa institute has a newly published book that outlines the theory and practice of Contemplative psychotherapy, *Contemplative Psychotherapy Essentials: Enriching Your Practice with Buddhist Psychology*, published by Norton Press, 2014, which I recommend to anyone who would like a richer understanding of the theory. Additionally, Susan Orsillo and Lizbeth Roemer have written a book that is helpful with adolescents but is probably better described as a cognitive approach infused with mindfulness practices rather than contemplative, "The Mindful Way Through Anxiety," published in 2011 by Guilford Press.