

# Mindfulness 'Here and Now': Suggestions for practicing mindfulness together *with* autistic people

Kelly Beck, PhD, CRC, LPC  
Assistant Professor of Psychiatry  
April 26, 2024



1

## Disclosures

### GRANT FUNDING:

- The Edith L. Trees Charitable Trust
- US Department of Defense W81XWH-18-1-0284
- PA Department of Health
- HRSA ATN AIR-P UA3 MC 11054
- University of Pittsburgh Clinical and Translational Scholars Program (KL2) 1 KL2 TR001856-05

Receive payments as a Mindfulness-based Stress Reduction teacher



© 2024 University of Pittsburgh REACT Research Program. All rights reserved.

2

# Learning Objectives

- 01**  
Understand evidence-based mindfulness interventions for autistic people with and without intellectual disability.
- 02**  
Engage in 2 present-focused mindfulness practices to foster self-compassion.
- 03**  
Recall suggestions for utilizing mindfulness practices with autistic people with and without intellectual disability.

© 2024 University of Pittsburgh REACT Research Program. All rights reserved.

**CE**  
Autism Center of Excellence  
**REACT**

3



# What is Mindfulness?

4



5

# What is mindfulness?

“The awareness that emerges from paying attention, on purpose in the present moment, without judgment or reaction to whatever appears in the field of your experience”

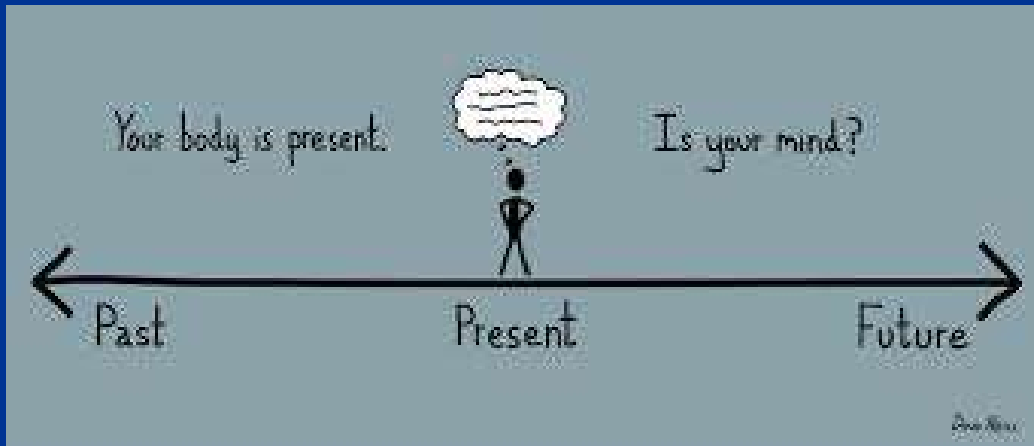
-Jon Kabat-Zinn

Kabat-Zinn, 2003  
© 2024 University of Pittsburgh REACT Research Program. All rights reserved.

**Pitt ACE**  
Autism Center of Excellence  
**REACT**

6

## What is Mindfulness?



© 2024 University of Pittsburgh REACT Research Program. All rights reserved.

**Pitt ACE**  
Autism Center of Excellence  
**REACT**

7

## Meditation

- One way to cultivate mindfulness
- Focused, intentional concentration
- Many different types of meditation
  - Vipassana, insight, 'mindfulness meditation', transcendental, Zen, metta



© 2024 University of Pittsburgh REACT Research Program. All rights reserved.

**Pitt ACE**  
Autism Center of Excellence  
**REACT**

8

## Mindfulness ≠ meditation

- Not the same thing
- Mindfulness is awareness in the present moment
- Meditations are a way to learn mindfulness
- There are many ways to learn mindfulness

Beck et al., 2020; Gunaratana, 2010  
© 2024 University of Pittsburgh REACT Research Program. All rights reserved.



9

## Mindfulness Myths

- Mindfulness is for relaxation
- Mindfulness is for reducing stress
- Mindfulness is always pleasant
- Mindfulness makes you happier
- Mindfulness conflicts with religion



© 2024 University of Pittsburgh REACT Research Program. All rights reserved.



10

# Mindfulness-based interventions & autism

Why this makes so much sense.....



© 2024 University of Pittsburgh REACT Research Program. All rights reserved.

**Pitt ACE**  
Autism Center of Excellence  
**REACT**

11

## Mechanistic fit for autism



Don't miss Dr. Mazefsky's keynote....

- Improved emotion regulation → higher risk
- Increasing awareness → alexithymia and interoception
- Increasing self-compassion → marginalization & esteem
- Physiology → hyperarousal and sensory sensitivities

© 2024 University of Pittsburgh REACT Research Program. All rights reserved.

**Pitt ACE**  
Autism Center of Excellence  
**REACT**

12

# Tailored to differing needs

- Experiential learning = generalization challenges
- Not reliant on cognitive strategies
- Easily tailored for heterogeneous presentations
- Evidence is strong across ability levels
  - Speaking
  - Intellectual ability
  - Attentional capacity



© 2024 University of Pittsburgh REACT Research Program. All rights reserved.

Beck, 2021; White et al., 2018

13

# Compared to other approaches

## Behavioral approaches

Context and environment management

Focus on consequences, problem solving (can sometimes involve trigger avoidance)

Bad emotions/behaviors (not people)

Often reliant on other people for prompting and consequence administration

## CBT

Top-down, reliance on rational (frontal) brain

Dependent on speaking / verbal ability

Corrective learning, often through exposures

Processing

## Mindfulness

Awareness

Non-judgment

Focus on present moment

Self-compassion

Highly experiential & routine based

© 2024 University of Pittsburgh REACT Research Program. All rights reserved.



14

## Evidence in autism

Emerging as an evidence-based practice

- Adults:
  - Mindfulness-based Stress Reduction
  - Dialectical Behavior Therapy
  - EASE (young adults with and without intellectual disability)
- Adolescents
  - EASE (with and without intellectual disability)
- Youth
  - MYMind (parent, child concurrent training)

Ritschel et al., 2022; Bemmoura et al., 2022; Phillips et al., 2024; Hartmann et al., 2019; Cachia et al., 2016; de Bruin et al., 2015; Beck, 2022; Conner et al., 2019; Beck et al., 2020; Sizoo & Kiuper, 2017; Spek et al., 2013)

© 2024 University of Pittsburgh REACT Research Program. All rights reserved.



15

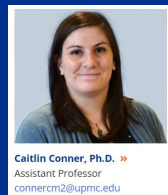
## EASE Program

- Individual therapy program
- 16-20 sessions long, 1 session per week
- In person or virtual (encourage in person)
- Autistic people ages 12-25 with and without co-occurring intellectual disability who are able to participate in therapy



Conner CM et al., 2019; Beck et al., 2020; Beck et al., 2021

© 2024 University of Pittsburgh REACT Research Program. All rights reserved.

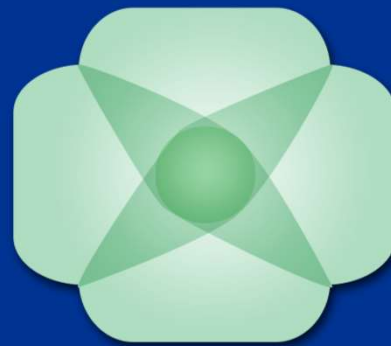


16



# EASE Program

- Individual therapy program
- 16-20 sessions long, 1 session per week
- In person or virtual (encourage in person)
- Autistic people ages 12-25 with and without co-occurring intellectual disability who are able to participate in therapy



**EASE**  
TOOLS FOR CALMING THE CHAOS

Conner CM et al., 2019; Beck et al., 2020; Beck et al., 2021

© 2024 University of Pittsburgh REACT Research Program. All rights reserved.



17

## Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR)

8 week  
standardized  
intervention

2.5 hours weekly  
group sessions

1 full day (7.5  
hours) silent  
meditation retreat  
after week 6

45 minutes daily  
meditation  
practice

Meditations: body  
scan, walking,  
sitting, hatha  
yoga

Kabat-Zinn, 1985, 1990, 2011; Santorelli, 2001a; Beck et al., 2020; Sizoo & Kiuper, 2017; Spek et al., 2013  
© 2024 University of Pittsburgh REACT Research Program. All rights reserved.



18

## Mindfulness exercises

Present-moment focused exercises

- Breathing exercises
- Mindful coloring
- Yoga
- Mindful seeing
- 5 senses



**Pitt ACE**  
Autism Center of Excellence  
**REACT**

© 2024 University of Pittsburgh REACT Research Program. All rights reserved.

19

## Utilizing mindfulness with autistic people



**Pitt ACE**  
Autism Center of Excellence  
**REACT**

© 2024 University of Pittsburgh REACT Research Program. All rights reserved.

20

# Key Considerations

- Requires routine, family-based integration
- Regular practice and repetition
- Not first introduced in crisis
- Highly dependent on modeling
- Flexibility of practices
- Tailoring to sensory, communication, & cognitive needs

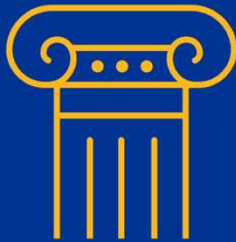


© 2024 University of Pittsburgh REACT Research Program. All rights reserved.

21

# Autism Affirming Application

Compassionate present focus



Encouraging awareness in the moment, building over time

Routine practices



Repetition, integration into routines; tailoring to sensory and needs

Modeling non-judgment



Support person; family integration; not consequence driven



© 2024 University of Pittsburgh REACT Research Program. All rights reserved.

22

## Considerations when incorporating 'mindfulness' into plans or sessions:

- What is the intention of the practice?
- At what time are you introducing it?
- How is it being introduced?
- What are the other approaches you are using?
  - Are they consistent with mindfulness?
  - Present focused and coping – not consequences

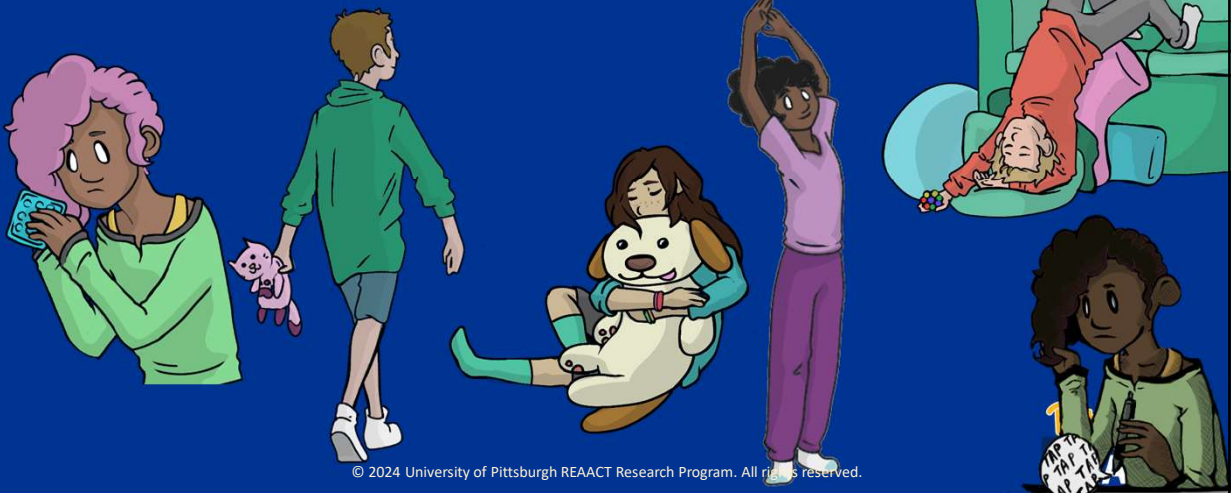


**Pitt ACE**  
Autism Center of Excellence  
**REACT**

© 2024 University of Pittsburgh REACT Research Program. All rights reserved.

23

## What do you expect meditation to look like?



© 2024 University of Pittsburgh REACT Research Program. All rights reserved.

24

## Creating a safe space

- Comfortable environment
- Consider lighting, positioning, space for mindfulness practices
- All emotions are welcome
- Present focused sessions
- Allowing movement and creative outlets



**Pitt ACE**  
Autism Center of Excellence  
**REACT**

© 2024 University of Pittsburgh REACT Research Program. All rights reserved.

25

## Autism specific considerations

- Limit metaphors, poems, imagery
- Specific language in recordings
- Intentionally modeling movement
- Avoid phrasing things as rules
- Avoid any implicit messages of right or wrong
- Challenge your own expectations for engagement
- Encourage practice, not responses




**Pitt ACE**  
Autism Center of Excellence  
**REACT**


Beck, Conner, White & Mazefsky, 2020  
© 2024 University of Pittsburgh REACT Research Program. All rights reserved.

26

# Tailoring to needs



NEED	CONSIDERATION
Limited speech and/or comprehension	Reduce words Scripting Physical modeling & props Support person
Difficult to remain still	Try movement-based practices Model movement
Attention	Longer practices Movement based
Sensory	Integrate with sensory tools Awareness of body "What is needed now"
Rumination	Regular pauses Movement practices Modeling



© 2024 University of Pittsburgh REACT Research Program. All rights reserved.

27

# Common Pitfalls and Solutions

We recorded challenges using mindfulness in autism across our trials....



28

## Most common client challenges

- Attention and focus
- Internal awareness
- Impatience
- Avoidance
- “Too much”
- “Not working”
- Sleeping
- Thinking you have to sit still



Beck, Conner, White & Mazefsky, 2020

© 2024 University of Pittsburgh REACT Research Program. All rights reserved.



29

## Most common challenges in neurotypical clients....

- Attention and focus
- Internal awareness
- Impatience
- Avoidance
- “Too much”
- “Not working”
- Sleeping
- Thinking you have to sit still

They are the same!! These are challenges for all of us learning mindfulness!

These challenges are all EXPECTED

Beck, Conner, White & Mazefsky, 2020

© 2024 University of Pittsburgh REACT Research Program. All rights reserved.



30

## Suggestions for Common Client Challenges

Common Client Challenges	Suggestions
"Not working"	<p>This is an expectation. Avoid over-explaining the error in this expectation.</p> <p>Model challenges. Name the expectation. "Great job noticing that you were expecting to feel focused and calm and instead you didn't". "What did you notice instead?"</p>
Sleeping	<p>Postures Hand up</p>

Beck, Conner, White & Mazefsky, 2020

© 2024 University of Pittsburgh REACT Research Program. All rights reserved.

**Pitt ACE**  
Autism Center of Excellence  
**REACT**

31

## Suggestions for Common Client Challenges

Common Client Challenges	Suggestions
Attention and focus (distress about this)	<p>Model this in yourself Longer practices with specific anchor Encourage mind wandering</p>
Internal awareness (“I don’t know”)	<p>“I don’t know” is common and OK! <u>Series of responses over several weeks:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Model noticing external stimuli</li> <li>• Place hand on body &amp; use movement</li> <li>• Gradually guide to internal</li> <li>• Encourage practicing</li> </ul>

Beck, Conner, White & Mazefsky, 2020

© 2024 University of Pittsburgh REACT Research Program. All rights reserved.

**Pitt ACE**  
Autism Center of Excellence  
**REACT**

32



# Suggestions for Common Client Challenges

Common Client Challenges	Suggestions
Avoidance	<p>Make intentions &amp; model grace when missed</p> <p>Being present is difficult</p> <p>Can't meet our goals without noticing</p>
"Too much"	<p>Safe, neutral anchor in body</p> <p>Be aware of permissive guidance</p> <p>"Too much zone"</p>
Impatience	<p>Model this in yourself</p>

Beck, Conner, White & Mazefsky, 2020



33

# Be Curious and Flexible!!

- Flexibility on postures & model this!
- Encourage client to choose supportive posture for each practice



© 2024 University of Pittsburgh REACT Research Program. All rights reserved.



34

## Most common clinician pitfalls

- Over-processing & explaining
- Leading without personal practice
- Meditations too short
- Inflexibility
- Too much labeling

*“What did you notice in that meditation?” Response: “I don’t know”. “Did you notice anything in your body?” Response: “Calm.” “Great, where did you notice calm in your body?” Response: “I don’t know”. “Did you notice your breathing?” No response. “Emotions?” No response.*

Beck, Conner, White & Mazefsky, 2020



35

## Suggestions for clinician pitfalls

Common Clinician Pitfalls	Suggestions
Over-processing	<p>Reflect why you are over-processing</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “I don’t know” → Model awareness to the client &amp; engage support person</li> <li>• Convincing → mindfulness is very hard and unpleasant</li> <li>• Unsure if they understand → trust the experiential process</li> </ul>

Beck, Conner, White & Mazefsky, 2020

© 2024 University of Pittsburgh REACT Research Program. All rights reserved.



36

## Suggestions for clinician pitfalls

Common Clinician Pitfalls	Suggestions
Leading without personal practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Use the recording of a teacher (EASE)</li> <li>Practice together</li> <li>Do the same home practice as your client</li> <li>Practice in consultation &amp; with colleagues</li> </ul>
Inflexibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Manual is a guide</li> <li>Mindfulness is PRESENT FOCUS</li> <li>Flexibly, intentionally respond to what is here now</li> </ul>

Beck, Conner, White & Mazefsky, 2020

© 2024 University of Pittsburgh REACT Research Program. All rights reserved.



37

## Suggestions for clinician pitfalls

Common Clinician Pitfalls	Suggestions
Meditations too short	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Second most common, especially in autism</li> <li>Remember dosage</li> <li>Physiological response to meditations</li> <li>Mind takes a long time to settle</li> <li>Try longer with movement</li> <li>Try all postures with all meditations</li> </ul>
Explaining	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Mindfulness is experienced</li> <li>It is already in you → state of being</li> <li>STOP and practice together, use what occurs</li> </ul>
Too much labeling	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Clients will also label their experience</li> <li>Reflect back in neutral terms</li> <li>Curiosity</li> </ul>

Beck, Conner, White & Mazefsky, 2020

© 2024 University of Pittsburgh REACT Research Program. All rights reserved.



38

## Summary: Clinical Suggestions

- Practice yourself
- Ensure support person knows the importance that they practice
- Practice with your client
- Safe environment: lights, privacy, warmth

Do not first introduce a new mindfulness practice in crisis

© 2024 University of Pittsburgh REACT Research Program. All rights reserved.



39

## Activity!

Let's practice together



40

I've learned that emotions are part of me.

I've learned emotions are a part of me.

I can't avoid them completely.

I can't avoid them completely.



**Pitt ACE**  
Autism Center of Excellence  
**REACT**

© 2024 University of Pittsburgh REACT Research Program. All rights reserved.