

Introducing Mindfulness to Patients with Diverse Beliefs and Backgrounds

with Ronald Siegel, PsyD
and Ruth Buczynski, PhD

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Dr. Buczynski: So how would you introduce that to a patient? I'm assuming you're not really going into any of the 'it has roots in Buddhism' or anything like that kind of conversation with most patients. So, what would you do?

Dr. Siegel: That's a great question and I do a lot of traveling around and teaching about this and the clinicians very often ask me that and particularly clinicians that practice in areas, you know other than Cambridge, Massachusetts; Berkley, California and Boulder, Colorado, which are hot beds of new age thinking and the like...where if something is Buddhist, people say "Well naturally!"

But if you're teaching this in parts of the world in which Buddhism is seen as a foreign religion or even perhaps as a pagan or problematic tradition, it's really important to find a way to make this culturally comfortable for our clients or patients.

This really begins with knowing who my client or patient is to begin with. If I'm seeing patients who are rather scientifically oriented, and I know they would not be drawn to anything with a religious or spiritual framework to it, I'll talk to them about systematic attentional training.

In fact when Zindel Segal, Mark Williams and John Teasdale first developed mindfulness-based cognitive therapy, which we'll talk about a little bit later, and they were looking for government grants to get funding to do the research on this, they called it something like systematic attentional training.

They weren't going to talk about mindfulness or something that sounded religious. It was simply presented as a psychological technique, and in fact, it is a psychological technique.

So, it's perfectly legitimate to present it that way and to say that there's a really huge growing body of literature showing that when people practice this technique, it brings about desirable changes in their sense of well-being, in their capacity to work with difficult feelings, and, in fact, in their ability to enjoy the rest of their life. So, for secular folks I would go in that direction.

If you're working with somebody who is religious in their background, but would be alienated by – I often joke about the 'B' word – mentioning Buddhism, then mindfulness can be presented in different ways.

"...if you're teaching this in parts of the world in which Buddhism is seen as a foreign religion or even perhaps as a pagan or problematic tradition, it's really important to find a nice way to make this culturally comfortable for our clients or patients."

One way to do it is to choose a mindfulness practice that comes from a tradition close to the patient's tradition. For instance, I was just sitting with a patient of mine yesterday who's a life-long Catholic,

and she attends mass regularly and she's part of the lay community in her church and we were talking about centering prayer. Now, centering prayer was evolved by Thomas Keating, who is a priest who became interested in Buddhist meditation practices, as did Thomas Merton by the way.

"...the key is flexibility."

There's a whole tradition of this going back several decades. And then they started looking in the Catholic literature and found that there was this text called the *Cloud of Unknowing* that basically describes a number of formal mindfulness practices, but they're framed within the Catholic tradition. They're framed as ways to become closer to God and to feel the movement of the Holy Spirit using a similar conceptual frame, but the basic practice is bringing your attention to an object of awareness and when the mind wanders from that object of awareness – and that object of awareness can be a prayer for instance – you simply bring your awareness back to that object of attention.

So, it really depends on the cultural background. I'm not familiar with practices that are in a more fundamentalist Protestant tradition for folks there. I've heard a number of clinicians say that they will talk to their patients about techniques that may make it easier for them to participate in their prayer life, that may make it easier to focus on their prayer life and to be attentive to their experience during prayer... simply saying that this is a mindfulness practice which can help us to pray more effectively. In the Jewish tradition people have lifted a number of practices from the Kabbalistic or Jewish mystical tradition that are very much like mindfulness practices. So, I think the key here is flexibility.

"...mindfulness is a psychological and scientific technique."

And if I may say one last thing about this...when I was with the Dalai Lama some time ago and he was asked the question about introducing this for the treatment of depression, he paused and he said, "Look folks," and he summoned a group of scientists and clinicians, "when you introduce this in Western cultures, please don't tell them it comes from Buddhism because many, many people are going to be alienated from that and the whole point of Buddhist practice is to alleviate suffering as widely as possible. So just tell them these are scientific techniques."

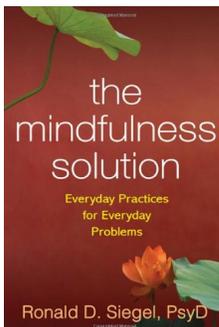
About The Speaker:



Ronald D. Siegel, PsyD is an Assistant Clinical Professor of Psychology at Harvard Medical School where he has taught for over 25 years. A long-time student of mindfulness meditation, he serves on the Board of Directors and faculty of the Institute for Meditation and Psychotherapy, teaches nationally about mindfulness, psychotherapy and mind/body treatment, and maintains a private clinical practice in Lincoln, Massachusetts.

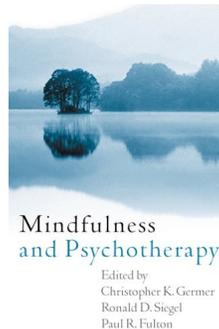
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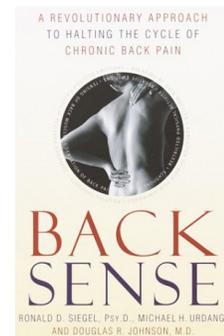
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