

Mindfulness for Child Welfare Workers



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By profession, child welfare workers are caring and compassionate individuals who provide support, encouragement and resources to individuals and families experiencing a very difficult time in the lives. This work can be very rewarding. The feeling of satisfaction and pleasure one receives when working with individuals who are experiencing distress is known as 'compassion satisfaction'. However, constant exposure to stress and traumatic experiences inherent in child welfare can also contribute to the development of adverse outcomes such as reduced job satisfaction, compassion fatigue, and burnout leading to a considerably high turnover rate.

One way for workers to reduce stress and cultivate compassion satisfaction and resilience is through the practice of mindfulness. In setting the intention to be mindful in the moment, workers can learn to fully experience the present and be more accepting of the ups and downs that are part of the profession. Research demonstrates that mindfulness is a beneficial practice that can help increase psychological wellbeing and reduce burnout in child welfare workers.

WHAT IS MINDFULNESS?

Mindfulness is a mental state achieved by calmly and purposefully paying attention to one's thoughts, feelings and bodily sensation in the present moment, without judgment. Mindfulness training is a practice carried forward from ancient times to the present day, to help the mind become calmer, as well as stronger and clearer. A regular practice of mindfulness helps increase greater awareness as well as increased acceptance of thoughts, feelings, and life experiences, while nurturing a compassionate sense of curiosity.

MINDFULNESS AS SELF CARE

Mindfulness training is especially helpful as a coping skill for stress and anxiety and can be beneficial for child welfare workers and clients alike. It can be a wonderful way to begin and/or end a session. For the best outcome, mindfulness experts suggest that practitioners must first be engaged in their own practice before teaching it to others. In addition to deriving the health benefits of practicing for oneself, the practitioner also has a better understanding of how to teach the skill to clients.

A child welfare worker may decide to engage in formal mindfulness meditation practice. Formal practice can include a daily routine of taking time to focus on an external object, such as a candle, or an internal reference point, such as the breath, with the purpose of bringing one's attention to the present moment. However, mindfulness may also be practiced informally, in everyday life and even on the busiest days. For example, one can practice mindfulness while washing the dishes, taking a shower, or even walking to one's car. It is simply focusing the mind and bringing one's attention to what one is doing, rather than thinking of something else.

TRY IT OUT

There are many ways child welfare workers can engage in mindfulness practice. These are just two examples: Mindfulness of Breath; Three-Centers Check-in. Both of these are practices that a worker can do on their own, or with a client at the beginning or end of a session.

Mindfulness of the Breath

- 1 Preparation for mindfulness:** Position your body in a way that feels comfortable. You can sit, stand or lie down: whatever feels most comfortable for you. Your head should be resting comfortably, and not tilted either forward or back. Arms and shoulders are relaxed, with hands resting on your thighs. Your eyes can remain open, gazing softly downward or closed if you prefer. Your face and jaw are relaxed, and your mouth may be slightly open, so that you are breathing out of both the nose and mouth.
- 2 Begin by bringing your focus to your breath:** Begin to notice your breath. Be with your breath as it flows in and out of your body. Do not attempt to control your breathing; allow it to be as it is. If your mind wanders, just gently bring it back to being with the breath. If you have a thought or series of thoughts, notice them silently to yourself -- and let them go, gently guiding your attention back to the breathing. Remember, there is nothing wrong with thoughts, they are just thoughts -- the practice involves just noticing them and letting them go.

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THE 7 PILLARS OF MINDFULNESS

- 1 **Non-judgment** - Being an impartial witness to your experience
- 2 **Patience** - Acceptance that things must unfold in their own time
- 3 **Beginner's mind** - Willingness to see everything as if for the first time
- 4 **Trust** - Learning to trust yourself and your feelings, despite prior mistakes
- 5 **Non-striving** - Focusing on being rather than doing
- 6 **Acceptance** - Seeing things as they actually are in the present
- 7 **Letting be** - Allowing an experience to be as it is without attaching value

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HEAD CENTER:
What am I thinking?

HEART CENTER
What am I feeling?

BODY CENTER
What am I sensing?

Three Center Check-in

Three Centers Check-in is a quick way to become more intentional and focused. It can be done while walking to an appointment, while waiting for a client or even with a client. The practice consists of three questions that help direct your attention to what you are thinking, feeling and sensing.

REMINDERS FOR INDIVIDUALS NEW TO THE PRACTICE: It is normal for the mind to have thoughts, and this practice is not designed to get rid of them, just to notice them and let them go. Initial frustration over persisting thoughts is a common experience in the beginning. Practice noticing the frustration. It is important to realize that the moment you notice your thought, this itself is an act of mindfulness. Practice allowing your thoughts to arise and pass, similar to clouds floating by.

Make Mindfulness Part of Your Routine

It can be beneficial to incorporate mindfulness into your routine so that it becomes a habit. Ask yourself where you might be able to fit this practice into your day? Would it be helpful to practice first thing in the morning, or before you go to sleep? Where in your home could you find a quiet place to practice mindfulness? There are many free meditation timer apps for smartphones to consider as well.

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