Teaching Mindfulness Meditation within a Schema Therapy Framework

David Bricker and Miriam Labin

Introduction

Meditation has a rich history that goes back thousands of years, far beyond the development of scientific psychology and Schema Therapy. While the exact origins of meditation cannot be known, there is agreement that some form of it existed in Asia thousands of years ago. This history is not only long but also has considerable breadth; all major religious traditions have included some form of meditation as part of their rituals.

The twentieth century led to exciting new advances in these centuries-old traditions. As the world grew smaller with unprecedented developments in communication, knowledge of meditation spread from Asia to the West. In the 1960s this process accelerated as the Beatles studied with Guru Maharishi Mahesh Yogi in India and popularized his work in Transcendental Meditation. As the popularity of meditation spread, a multitude of empirical studies were conducted that showed its benefits on health and psychological Well-being (Wallace, 1970; Benson, Malvea and Graham, 1973; Golcman and Schwartz, 1976; Shapiro, 1980).

It was not long before psychologists began to integrate meditation into other treatments. Marsha Linehan (1993) included meditation as part of dialectical behavior therapy. Concurrently, Jonathan Kabat-Zinn (1990) began writing about meditation and stress reduction. As part of this trend many ST practitioners included meditation as part of their treatment protocols. An informal survey of Schema Therapists attending the ISST conference in Coimbra, Portugal in 2008 showed that about half were already teaching meditation to their clients.

While for the most part meditation provided benefits to our patients, problems were encountered along the way. Segal, Williams, and Teasdale (2002) cite several in teaching meditation to psychotherapy clients, among them resistance to home-work, attitudes toward practice, coping with painful emotions, boredom, difficulties in staying focused, avoidance of negative emotions, preconceptions about what meditation is, and dealing with the dialectic between acceptance and action.

Taking into account some of these pitfalls as well as the nature of Schema Therapy, the intention of this chapter is to present a method for teaching meditation that makes it easy for the patients to learn meditation as part of ST. ST is a unique form of therapy and the manner in which meditation is taught can be adapted to it so that it is integrated into the

The Wiley-Blackwell Handbook of Schema Therapy, Theory, Research and Practice, First Edition. Edited by Michael van Vreeswijk, Jenny Broersen, Marjon Nadort. © 2012 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd. Published 2012 by John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

therapy process. We advocate that meditation should not be taught as a stand-alone technique, but rather as something that is integrated into the entire therapeutic process.

We suggest a method in which clients learn a variety of brief mindfulness exercises and are also trained on when and how to apply each of them. Clients develop the ability to choose a meditation that supports their ability to cope better with the current situation in the context of the schema mode that they are experiencing.

In order to best integrate meditation into ST we divide it into seven components:

- 1. Awareness
- 2. Choice and Intention
- 3. Relaxation
- 4. Letting Go
- 5. Here and Now Focus
- 6. Nonjudgmental Acceptance
- 7. Values

For each of the components we will discuss the nature of the component and how it is a part of meditation. We will then discuss how to teach patients to use this technique. Finally, we will give examples of how each particular component is related to the process of ST.

Awareness

One of the most important themes in meditation is moment-to-moment awareness, which means directing attention and fully engaging your experience in the current moment. Being "in the moment" is seen as a positive value. Thus, if you are eating an apple, this kind of meditation would direct you to focus on the sensations that arise while you are eating, such as the taste and texture of the apple on your tongue.

Likewise, when one is at a movie or engaged in a social event, the ideal is to be aware of what is going on at the moment it occurs. There are many variations on this theme in meditation. One can meditate by focusing on different parts of the body, fiat instance by noticing how our weight shifts from one foot to the other as we walk. The following body-scan meditation increases awareness to bodily sensations.

Exercise: guided body scan meditation

Take a moment to get comfortable. Become aware of your breathing. Notice how air effortlessly and rhythmically enters your nose or mouth and how your lungs expand on the outbreath. Now notice how your lungs contract on the outbreath and the air leaves your body. Focus on different parts of your body as you breathe.

Now focus on your hands and fingers. Notice how both hands and all of your fingers feel.

Now shift your focus to your forearms ... and then to your upper arms. Notice all of the feelings and sensations. -Sec if you can detect different feelings in different parts of your arms.

Now pay attention to your shoulders and neck. Just notice what you are feeling in these areas. Notice any sensations that you feel.

Now notice your feet and your toes. Try to feel as much of your feet and toes as possible. See what they feel like.

Now notice your ankles and your calves. Notice the sensations, notice how they feel. Now be aware of your thighs. Notice how they feel. Notice any sensations in your thighs. Now shift your attention to your groin and your lower abdomen.

Now focus on your chest and back. Notice any sensations, mentally taking stock of any sensations you find.

Now direct your attention to your face. Notice your forehead, your eyes, your cheeks, your jaws, your lips. just notice what these areas feel like. Become aware of any sensations you can connect with.

Awareness and Schema Therapy

Awareness of internal processes is central to any system of psychotherapy. Patients come to us with complaints about failed relationships and negative emotions. But they are not aware of the schemas and modes that they will soon be confronting. It is our job to help them to become aware of their inner thoughts and feelings so that we can engage them in ST. By teaching them awareness exercises we make it easier for them to pay attention to what is happening inside them so they can deal with it in therapy. The following example of a patient who presents with emotional detachment illustrates how awareness can be used as part of ST.

Choice and Intention

Box 1:

When Debora first presented in therapy she showed minimal affect. She said that her husband wanted her to start therapy. According to him, it was impossible to engage her in any emotional talk since she always turned to something she had to do for work and had a difficult time just sitting in one place and discussing emotional issues. Debora's husband was describing her Detached Protector mode. However, her Facial expressions and demeanor suggested that underneath her strict appearance there was an Angry mode that she was struggling with. She would often drink alcohol in order to avoid her angry feelings. Her husband felt that he couldn't talk to her anymore and threatened to divorce her unless she came to therapy. Debora said that she felt very uncomfortable having "emotional talks." She realized that she had trouble recognizing her emotions even when she was alone. She told the therapist that as a child, her mother responded negatively by mocking her when she expressed her feelings and her father was very cold, aloof, and uninvolved with his family. Debora's first assignment was to simply ask herself: What am I thinking about right now? What am I feeling right now? Later, Debora learned the body-scan meditation. Gradually, she became more aware of her emotions and felt less uncomfortable staying with her emotions instead of deflecting from them. She noticed that she often felt angry about different needs that were not being met. This opened the possibility for her to listen to her anger and express her needs to her husband and other people who were close to her. By becoming aware of her Detached Protector mode she was able to notice more about the negative patterns in her life so she could confront them with her therapist.

In mindfulness meditation "choice and intention" have always formed a core component. It simply means that you can shift your attention to what you want to focus on and avoid distractions. It does not mean forcing yourself not to think about any certain thoughts; it is about what you want to focus on, not what you want to avoid. When your mind is wandering, you gently shift your thinking back to where you want it to be. The exercise below includes instructions on how to meditate by simply paying attention to your breathing.

Exercise: counting breaths

Begin by sitting comfortably in a chair, in a way that makes it easy for you to breathe slowly and relax. Simply pay attention to your breathing. Feel the air coming in through your nose, going in to your abdomen and going out again. Let your mind follow your breath a couple of times.

First, focus on the in-breath and say the number "one" as you breathe in. Then think the word "out" as you breathe out. Then say the number "two" on the next in breath. And think the word "out" as you breathe out.

Continue to follow every breath, counting as you breathe in and saying the word "out" in your mind very softly. When your mind wanders and you find yourself thinking about something else, gently bring it back to the breathing, counting as you breathe in and saying the word "out" to yourself, Practice doing that for a couple of minutes.

Continue to follow every in-breath saying a number to yourself very softly. You can combine focusing on the air going out while saying the word "out" and focusing on the air coming in while saying a number: "one—out", "two—out," and so on. When your mind is wandering bring it back to the breath with the minimum amount of effort, simply continuing to count and focusing on the air coming in and out.

Choice and intention and Schema Therapy

Clients learn that when feeling depressed or anxious they can shift attention to something else rather than continue to focus on the negative thoughts. They apply this mindfulness training to other life situations by simply asking a few questions such as: What would l like to think about right now? What is in my best interest right now? At work, for example, they can choose to shift their locus away from their depressed thoughts and focus on current tasks.

Relaxation

Box 2:

Ella is a 23-year-old graphic designer with a core schema of Defectiveness and Shame. She always felt defective in some major way. Her mother was very critical of her and her father was remote. One of her core childhood memories is of her mother smacking her for not tidying her room as her father watches from another room, not saying anything. Ella frequently thought: "I'm strange and boring" and "nobody loves me." Such thoughts were bothering her daily and causing her a lot of distress. She had limited social interactions because she was afraid that people would not like her when they got to know her. She kept a few friends from high school, but did not acquire new friends in college and never had a boyfriend.

Despite her difficulties, Ella recognized a healthier part of her that helped her resist these negative thoughts. When she was in a healthy mode she thought: "This is stupid. I'm exaggerating. I know that people who are close to me love and appreciate me." During the course of Schema Therapy, Ella learned to shift her attention to her breath whenever she felt overwhelmed by negative thoughts. After she was able to shift her focus to her breathing, it also became easier for her to shift her focus to her Healthy Adult mode. Her experience of her healthy side increased together with her positive view of herself. She felt less defective and more in control. As a result, she began to expand her social interactions and even started dating.

Although some psychologists disagree, we believe that relaxation is an essential component of meditation. When we experience excessive anxiety it is hard for us to concentrate. Although we can go through the steps of various meditation exercises while feeling high arousal, it would be hard to benefit from the exercises without feeling a modicum of calmness in order to concentrate.

There are two simple relaxation techniques we show clients: slow deep breathing and progressive muscle relaxation (PMR). Reduction of stress in PMR is done by releasing tense muscles. While releasing tension, clients learn the difference between stress and relaxation.

Exercise: slow, deep breathing relaxation

Begin by sitting comfortably and paying attention to your breathing. Try to breathe slower and slower. Let the air go all the way in through your nose to your abdomen. Stop for a second. And now let all the air out through your mouth. Notice your breathing becoming deeper and slower as you continue to breathe in and breathe out. As your breathing is going in and out you are becoming more and more relaxed.

Exercise: progressive muscle relaxation

Begin with slow, deep breathing. Let your breathing becoming deeper and slower as you inhale the air through your nose and exhale through your mouth. Let's start by making a fist in your right hand. Hold it and notice how it feels like. Hold it some more and then let go. Notice how it feels when you let go.

Now, try doing the same with your left hand. Make a fist and notice how it feels. Hold it some more and then let go. Notice how it feels when you let go. Study the differences between tension and relaxation.

Now let's continue with your right arm. Pull it up toward your shoulder and tense the muscles of your right arm. Hold it and notice how it feels. Hold it some more and then let go. Notice how it feels when you let go.

Now, try doing the same with your left arm. Pull it up toward your shoulder and notice how it feels. Hold it some more and then let go. Notice how it feels when you let go. Study the differences between tension and relaxation.

Continue with your shoulders. Pull up both of your shoulders toward your ears. Hold them and notice how they feel. Hold them some more and then let go. Notice how it feels when you let go. Study the differences between tension and relaxation.

Let's move on by tensing the muscles of your face. This is done by closing your mouth and your eyes tightly. Hold this position and notice how it feels. Hold it some more and then let go. Notice how it feels when you let go. Study the differences between tension and relaxation.

Let's continue with the abdominal muscles. Tense the abdominal muscles, holding them tightly. Study the tension in your abdominal muscles. Now, let go and notice the sensations that come with the relaxation. Notice the difference between tension and relaxation.

Continue with your right leg. Pull it straight up in the air while tensing your muscles. Hold it and notice how the tense feels. Hold it some more and then let go. Notice how it feels when it is relaxed.

Let's move on to your left leg, tensing the muscles of your left leg by pulling it straight up in the air. Hold it and notice what it feels like. Hold it some more and then let go. Notice how it feels when you let go. Study the differences between tension and relaxation.

Let's move to your right foot. Point your right foot. Feel the tension in your foot while you are pointing it and study the sensations that come along with this tension. Hold it some more and then let go. Notice what it feels like when it is relaxed.

Now point your left foot. Feel the tension in your foot while you are pointing it and study the sensations that come along with this tension. Hold it some more and then let go. Notice how it feels when you release the tension. Study the differences between tension and relaxation.

Relaxation and Schema Therapy

Relaxation practice is relatively easy to learn by following the therapist's directions. Relaxation by itself rarely solves complex issues, such as the client's Vulnerability schema in the example above, but it offers an immediate relief and a sense of control and efficacy.

Box 3:

Yvonne felt anxious almost all the time. She was always worried about her health and well-being and about the well-being of her family. Yvonne was suffering from a Vulnerability schema, perceiving herself as weak and unable to cope. She often checked her body, looking for lumps that might indicate she had cancer and checked for palpitations fearing that something was wrong with her heart. She asked her husband many times during the day for reassurance that she is healthy. She also called her children many times during the day to check that they were well.

Yvonne was diagnosed with hypochondria and general anxiety disorder. One of her major complaints was of severe muscle tension that tended to increase when she was overwhelmed with health concerns and other worries. We offered her PMR, which reduced some tension and was very relaxing for her. In the context of ST, PMR was framed as a coping tool that increased her ability to cope with anxiety.

Letting Go

In CBT and ST we teach clients to gain perspective over their thoughts and re-examine whether these thoughts correspond with reality. The "letting go" meditation also teaches clients to gain perspective over their thoughts, but in a different way. The idea is to let the thoughts just pass through your mind, acknowledge them, but not engage in them or analyze them. This meditation is specifically useful when the client experiences obsessive thoughts, concerns, or any kind of ruminative thinking.

Exercise: floating leaves on a stream

Close your eyes. Imagine that you are in the woods on a warm, sunny day sitting by a beautiful stream. The water flows over the rocks and descends downhill. You hear the calming sounds of the water and the trees above you. As you gaze down at the stream you notice that there are leaves floating down the stream.

Now become conscious of your thoughts. Each time a thought pops into your head imagine that you write it on a leaf and let the leaf float away down the stream with your thought on it. If you think in words, put them on the leaf as words. If you think in images, put them on the leaf as an image. Watch as the leaves disappear and the thought disappears with it.

The goal is to stay beside the stream and allow the leaves to keep flowing by. Don't try to make the stream go faster or slower don't try to change what shows up on the leaves in any way. If the leaves disappear or if you mentally go somewhere else, just notice that this has happened and gently direct your attention back to watching the leaves on the stream. Watch your thoughts as they are being written on each leaf and let them flow down the stream.

Box 4: Letting go and Schema Therapy

Jeff could not get his ex-girlfriend, Stacy, out of his mind. Jeff had an Abandonment schema and always had a hard time when ending a relationship. His parents divorced when he was five years old and he remembers their divorce as being very traumatic for him. One of his core memories is of his parents yelling at each other and totally ignoring him. Since the divorce they were not available to him or, as in his words: "It's like they were there but not really there." His father was often out of the state on business trips and his mother was very preoccupied with herself and always looking for new partners, so she was emotionally unavailable to him. As a result, Jeff developed an Abandonment schema.

Although Jeff and Stacy separated a year ago, his thoughts about her interfered with his daily routine. He had difficulties concentrating at work, became forgetful and uninterested in seeing his friends or meeting other women. Jeff was taught the letting go meditation. Whenever Stacy's face came to mind he would visualize putting it on a leaf. He did the same with thoughts such as: "How could she leave me?" which were bothering him. Soon, his ability to concentrate improved. He learned that when he is in his Surrender schema mode his tendency to think about Stacy increases. The letting go meditation helped him realize that thinking about Stacy would not help him get her back or feel better. Actually, he felt much better when he was able to focus on his job and enjoy the company of his friends.

Here and Now Orientation

One of the most important themes in mindfulness meditation is being in the here and now, or being in the present, rather than in the past or future. Clients who apply this meditation learn that negative thoughts and feelings often arise in relation to past and future events, but must less in relation to the present moment.

Exercise: tracking your thoughts in time

Keep your eyes open and take a few slow deep breaths. Now, just let your mind wander and start noticing your thoughts and feelings and where your awareness goes.

As long as you are focused on the present continue to look straight ahead. When you begin to think of something from the past, turn your head to the left. Then when your thoughts return to the present, look straight ahead once again. And when you find yourself thinking about the future, look to the right.

Box 5: Here and now orientation and Schema Therapy

Sam, aged 42, married, is very successful at his work as a computer programmer. His boss likes him and always says he can trust him. However, Sam became frustrated because other people got raises and promotions before him, even when he was sure that they did not produce as much as he did. He had difficulty expressing his frustration and felt that he was being used by his boss. Sam has a Self-Sacrifice schema, the tendency to always put others ahead of himself while neglecting his own needs. At home, he also felt unappreciated and whenever he complained to his wife she became defensive and angry. Lately, he began feeling more depressed and angry and decided to seek treatment.

As Sam practiced the "tracking your thoughts in time" meditation, he noticed that he mostly had thoughts about the past: "I got what I deserve," "I'm angry that others got promoted and I didn't"; and thoughts about the future "I'll never get what I deserve," "My boss will never appreciate my skills." However, Sam also noticed that for the brief moments that he focused on the "here and now" he felt more focused and somewhat calmer.

This exercise was helpful as part of an overall plan to help Sam to deal with his Self-Sacrifice schema. By doing the exercise he was able to put his problems in perspective. He was able to become less angry and could focus on expressing his needs in an assertive way in the present. He tried to approach difficult issues with his wife by focusing on the present and putting aside thoughts about the past and the future. This approach proved to be very rewarding. Eventually, Sam approached his boss and began to get some of the benefits he deserved.

Non-Judgmental Acceptance

In mindfulness meditation, acceptance has always been a core component aiming to help clients recognize thoughts and feelings without involving judgment. The goal is to view all experiences, all thoughts and feelings within a framework of acceptance rather than evaluation and criticism. As part of meditation, when a thought comes into your head the goal is to let yourself have the thought and just observe it.

We can say that the opposite of having a schema is accepting who you are as a person. So, for example, if you have thoughts such as "I think I'm a bad person" and "How could I get into this stupid fight and say all these negative things." Instead of judging yourself you start thinking: "I accept who I am and that I make mistakes, but I choose not to judge myself. I just accept that I made this mistake." The goal is to be accepting of whatever your experience is.

Exercise: accepting your thoughts

Close your eyes and gently focus your attention on whatever you are thinking about. Every time you notice that you are aware of something take a moment to notice what it is that you are thinking about. Then identify what it is and think: "I accept that I am thinking about this now." For example, if you find that you are worrying about an upcoming event, think to yourself: "I'm having worried thoughts about the event" and then "I accept that I'm having worried thoughts. " If you notice feeling sad, think to yourself: "I'm having feelings of sadness," and add: "I accept that I'm having feelings of sadness," and so on.

Do the same thing no matter where your awareness goes. With any thoughts, feelings, observations, memories, sensations just notice where your awareness is going, identify it, and think about accepting the experience.

Box 6: Acceptance and Schema Therapy

Tina, aged 22, always felt anxious about public speaking and other social situations. She started psychotherapy after her first year of college, during which she had a hard time presenting in class, going to parties, and participating in other social events. Tina often experienced a Critical Parent mode in which she was criticizing herself for the way she appeared and behaved.

Tina's core childhood memory was of her mother yelling at her in front of guests about not doing well in school. Her parents were very demanding and she grew up feeling that nothing she did was good enough for them. Even when she excelled in a test they would compare her to others in the class and assume that the test was not hard for her. So, she usually was not praised for her successes, but severely criticized when she did not meet her parents' standards.

She was bothered by her blushing during presentations, which was accompanied by thoughts such as "Everyone can see that I'm anxious" and "They probably think I'm a bad presenter and a bad student." Tina was diagnosed with social anxiety. As part of ST, Tina was taught acceptance meditation.

In generalizing from meditation to real life Tina's first goal was to accept her blushing and her anxiety while presenting in class. She practiced accepting her anxious thoughts, feelings, and sensations. She noticed that when she accepted her anxiety she felt less anxious over time. She was still anxious at the beginning of the presentation, but with acceptance her anxiety subsided and as she continued talking, she felt much less anxious. She also became an active participant in college parties and other social events. Tina's tendency to criticize her performance demonstrates her Critical Parent mode since she grew up with parents who showed merely conditional love in response to achievements, giving her the message that she was never good enough When she caught herself going into a Critical Parent mode she would practice gently shifting to thoughts such as "I accept myself the way I am."

Values

Working on values is different from practicing any other kind of mindfulness meditation. Values are not feelings or thoughts, but are a representation of one's sense of self and choices of life directions. Kabat-Zinn (1994) recommends that we ask ourselves, "What is my job on the planet?" or "What do I care about so much that I would pay to do it?" This can be done in conjunction with any mindfulness exercise or simply by thinking about the questions.

The following is an example of an exercise that can help clients connect with their life values.

Exercise: trusted adviser imagery

Close your eyes. Imagine that you are walking along a path in a very beautiful forest Enjoy the peace and quiet of the forest around you. Now, imagine that you are about to meet a person whom you can trust to always be there for you, someone who is wise and always has your best interests at heart, who always cares about you. This wise man or woman has wisdom and insight to give you. As you approach you clarify the question that you want to ask.

You reach this person and you ask your question.

Listen to the response that this trusted adviser gives to you.

This exercise can easily be simplified. Clients may just think about a decision to be made and then simply close their eyes and be aware of their breathing for a few minutes. Often they will have much greater clarity about the issue afterward.

Box 7: Values and Schema Therapy

Tom, aged 40, recently divorced, was going through a mid-life crisis. He had been working as an investment banker since graduating from college and was doing very well. However, he did not feel satisfied. He always loved visual art and specifically painting. He kept it as a hobby for many years, but felt that he was missing his true life passion. He wanted to focus exclusively on learning and teaching art. Tom experienced a real dilemma: Should I quit my job and focus on my passion? Is this really what I want to do or just part of this crisis that I am going through? Tom was afraid that when painting became his "day job" he might feel bored with it too at some point. We guided Tom through the wise man imagery. Tom imagined his grandfather, who always deeply cared about him, as the wise man. Eventually, Tom decided to take a leave of absence for six months from his job as a trial period before he made a decision about quitting his job. He thought that this would give him a chance to evaluate what his life as an artist would look like and still return to his job if things didn't work out. He told the therapist that the imagery with his grandfather gave him a lot of insight and a sense that he had someone that he could lean on.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the outline presented here is not intended to be seen as a final statement about the one correct way to teach meditation, but rather as a framework that skilled therapists can use to make their work in ST more effective for more clients, therapists can experiment with the different components and see which ones work best with their individual styles. Likewise, various clients will find that they prefer different types of meditation. There are countless examples of meditation exercises available and new ones are created every day. These methods can easily be integrated into our framework to make it fuller and more helpful.

Finally, there is no need to limit ourselves to these seven components. Psychologists may prefer to look at other attributes, or skills, such as connectedness, aliveness, appreciation, love, or contentment as core components. Some researchers (Gilbert and Tirch, 2008; Tirch, 2010) have begun to look at compassion as a core component in meditation. As ST evolves, the integration of meditation will continue in creative ways that will add to greater knowledge and efficiency in both fields.

References

Benson, H., Malvea, B. and Graham, I. (1973) Physiologic correlates of meditation and their clinical effects in headache: an ongoing investigation. *Headache*, *13*(1), 2344.

Gilbert, P. and Tirch, D. (2009) Emotional memory, mindfulness, and compassion, in Clinical Handbook of Mindfulness (ed. F. Di Donna). New York: Springer Science, pp. 99— 110.

Goleman, D.J. and Schwartz, G.E. (1976) Meditation as an intervention in stress free activity.

Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 44, 456-466.

Kabat-Zinn, J. (1990) Full Catastrophe Living: Using the Wisdom of Your Body and Mind to Face Stress, Pain, and Illness. New York: Dell.

Kabat-Zinn, I. (1994) Wherever You Go, There You Are: Mindfulness Meditation in Everyday Life. New York: Hyperion.

Linehan, M. (1993) *Cognitive-Behavioral Treatment of Borderline Personality Disorder*. New York: Guilford Press.

Segal, Z., Williams, J. and Teasdale, J. (2002) *Mindfulness-based Cognitive Therapy of Depression: a New Approach to Preventing Relapse.* New York: Guilford Press.

Shapiro, D.H. (1980) *Meditation: Self-Regulation Strategy and Altered State of Consciousness*. New York: Aldine.

Tirch, D. (2010) Mindfulness as a context for the cultivation of compassion. *International Journal of Cognitive Therapy*, *3*(2), 113–123.

Wallace, R.K. (1970) Physiological effects of transcendental meditation. *Science*, *167*, 1751–1754.