

Implementing Accessible Yoga and Mindfulness Techniques with Eating Disorder Clients



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Grace is a relationship-based therapist and relies on the importance of the therapeutic connection in her work with clients. She utilizes an individualized treatment approach in therapy drawing from narrative, cognitive behavioral and family systems based theories of practice.

In this time of social distancing, feeling isolated can contribute to an already stressful situation. Therapists assisting patients can help them take advantage of newly available time by providing guidance on resources and skills that can be cultivated at this time. Yoga is a practice that has been shown to help develop distress tolerance, mindfulness and acceptance. Thankfully yoga has grown in popularity and accessibility. Online, television and other recorded options that guide, teach and help to grow these practices are abundant and can be helpful resources for clinicians to recommend, especially in the current circumstances.

As practitioners, it is helpful to have an enhanced understanding of how to guide patients to the tools that are most appropriate. To start, it is helpful to dive into a deeper understanding of the meaning of the term Yoga. The Yoga Journal defines it thus, "The word yoga comes from the ancient Sanskrit root *yui*, which means "to yoke" or "to join"- as in yoking together a horse and a cart. Today, yoga is commonly defined as union, because the practice helps unite- or join together- many things. On the most basic level, yoga unites the body and the mind through the breath. On the most cosmic level, yoga unites the individual with the universe."

About Laureate

The internationally recognized Laureate Eating Disorders Program in Tulsa, Oklahoma, is personalized to meet the individual needs of patients with anorexia nervosa, bulimia and other eating-related difficulties. As a not-for-profit organization, Laureate provides values- and mission-driven care for adolescent girls and women from all over the world.

At Laureate, you can expect evidence-based care and an experience tailored to your unique needs that includes:

- An intentionally small milieu that provides opportunity for meaningful connection
- A therapist-to-patient ratio of 1:3
- An affiliation with the Laureate Institute for Brain Research, which focuses on identifying new, effective treatments for eating disorders.

Yoga involves aligning mind, body and breath. It encourages connection to body sensations and attuning to the body's requests. Additionally it assists those practicing to allow and approach appropriate discomfort. Most anyone can practice yoga. If someone is paying attention to their breathing, then they are in fact practicing yoga.

Secondly, when suggesting yoga to individuals, and especially those with an eating disorder, it is important to be aware of certain issues and contraindications.

- **Body Image Concerns**

Talk with the client about the intended benefit of their practice, how to challenge perfectionism and not compare themselves to other people within the class.

- **Type of Class**

All yoga is not created equal, and all types of classes would not be beneficial for an individual recovering from an eating disorder. Look for gentle classes when starting a practice. Avoid hot, power, or exercise-based classes that put emphasis on changing or shaping the body.

- **Know your Client**

It is important to know the client and whether they are practicing yoga to explore their relationship with their body or rather as an expression of their eating disorder.

- **Know your Community**

Consider studios that are helpful for first-time yogis and be sure that the studio offers a therapeutic space for the unique needs of individuals who have struggled with disordered eating or body image concerns.

Increased mindfulness is an especially helpful skill that yoga can help to develop. It is also helpful for clients to consider developing mindfulness as an independent skill.

One of the most important things to do in suggesting mindfulness cultivation is to start with a clear understanding of what the concept is. Mindfulness can be thought of as something simple, but not easy. Jon Kabat-Zinn describes mindfulness as, "...waking up and living in harmony with oneself and with the world. It has to do with examining who we are, with questioning our view of the world and our place in it, and with cultivating some appreciation for the fullness of each moment we are alive. Most of all it has to do with being in touch."





Below are simple ways practice mindfulness:

- **Mindful breathing exercises**

A person can slow down their breath to elicit the relaxation response. There are also breath techniques to increase energy levels.

- **Purposeful awareness**

This involves being mindful and aware of what we are doing as we are doing it. Mindfulness can be practiced in everyday tasks like doing the dishes or driving to work.

- **Mindful appreciation**

Practicing mindful appreciation might involve appreciating the mail person that brings your mail. Or taking a moment to appreciate where our food and water comes from and how it made its way to our kitchen table. Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, we can still take the time to appreciate beauty in nature and watch the spring trees and flowers begin to bloom and blossom.

- **Meditation**

Meditation can involve “sitting and forgetting.” Meditation can also involve focusing our awareness and attention on something specific. Metta meditation involves meditating around loving kindness for others and extending it to ourselves as well.

One silver lining in this time of uncertainty may be having more ample unstructured time to safely incorporate these techniques into daily living. When practiced safely and correctly, yoga and mindfulness can be powerful tools for coping with stress, be it from a global pandemic or more traditional life stressors.