Mindfulness training in stuttering therapy: A tutorial for speech-language pathologists

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Abstract

The use of mindfulness training for increasing psychological well-being in a variety of clinical and nonclinical populations has exploded over the last decade. In the area of stuttering, it has been widely recognized that effective long-term management often necessitates treatment of cognitive and affective dimensions of the disorder in addition to behavioral components. Yet, mindfulness based strategies and their possible usefulness in stuttering management have not been described in detail in the literature. This article seeks to engage professionals who treat stuttering in a conversation about the possible usefulness of incorporating mindfulness training into stuttering management. A review of the literature reveals that there is a substantial overlap between what is required for effective stuttering management and the benefits provided by mindfulness practices. Mindfulness practice results in decreased avoidance, increased emotional regulation, and acceptance in addition to improved sensory-perceptual processing and attentional regulation skills. These skills are important for successful long-term stuttering management on both psychosocial and sensory-motor levels. It is concluded that the integration of mindfulness training and stuttering treatment appears practical and worthy of exploration. Mindfulness strategies adapted for people who stutter may help in the management of cognitive, affective, and behavioral challenges associated with stuttering.

Educational objectives: Readers should be able to: (1) describe what mindfulness is and how it is cultivated; (2) identify the benefits that can be produced from mindfulness practice; (3) summarize how the benefits of mindfulness practice parallel what is often required for effective long-term stuttering management; and (4) identify specific mindfulness techniques that can be taught in stuttering therapy and explain their rationale.

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1. Introduction

Living with the disorder of stuttering is associated with many problems other than physical speech disruptions. Other problems include experiencing negative thoughts and emotions related to communication (Vanryckeghem, Hylebos, Brutten, & Peleman, 2001), being subjected to negative stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination (Boyle, Blood, & Blood, 2009; Cooper & Cooper, 1996; Gabel, Blood, Tellis, & Althouse, 2004; Hurst & Cooper, 1983; Silverman & Paynter, 1990), as well as victimization and bullying (Blood & Blood, 2007). These problems may be related to increased anxiety levels found in many people who stutter (PWS; this acronym also stands for “person who stutters”) (Menzies, Onslow, Packman, & O’Brian,
2. Mindfulness

A commonly cited definition of mindfulness is “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally” (Kabat-Zinn, 1994, p. 4). A more detailed description of mindfulness is “a process of regulating attention in order to bring a quality of non-elaborative awareness to current experience and a quality of relating to one’s experience within an orientation of curiosity, experiential openness, and acceptance” (Bishop et al., 2004, p. 234). Mindfulness is a multifaceted construct that includes observation of inner and outer experiences (e.g., noticing when one’s mood begins to change), acting with awareness (e.g., noticing the mind wandering and becoming distracted when doing an activity), and acceptance of internal and external phenomena (e.g., not being judgmental of oneself for feeling negative emotions) (Baer, Smith, & Allen, 2004). Mindfulness can be cultivated through various forms of meditation and informal practice involving either focused attention on something specific (e.g., the breath or physical sensations in the body), or open monitoring which is an alert observation to anything (thoughts, feelings, sensations) that arises without explicit focus on any object (Goldin & Gross, 2010).

Mindfulness based interventions include Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR; Kabat-Zinn, 1994), Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT; Segal, Williams, & Teasdale, 2002), Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT; Hayes et al., 2006), and Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT; Linehan, 1993). Therapies in which mindfulness training play a central role have been shown to help a broad range of individuals reduce symptoms of clinical (e.g., depression and anxiety) and non-clinical problems (e.g., unpleasant affect and psychological distress) (Bohlmeyer, Prenger, Taal, & Cuijpers, 2010; Grossman, Niemann, Schmidt, & Walach, 2004).

2.1. Mechanisms of change in mindfulness and parallels with existing treatments for stuttering

There are likely to be a variety of mechanisms responsible for the positive effects of mindfulness on well-being. Suspected mechanisms of change are described in this section. These mechanisms appear to parallel what is often required for long-term, successful management of stuttering. Many of these concepts are already used in traditional speech therapy for stuttering, however, utilizing mindfulness practices may be a valuable means for cultivating these skills.
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