


Chapter 14

Mindfulness–Based Interventions for Externalizing Disorders of Childhood and Adolescence: A Narrative Review

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ABSTRACT

Externalizing disorders characterized by behavioral problems manifest in the children's outward behaviors such as poor impulse control, impulsivity, and inattention may result in children negatively acting out on the external environment. When untreated, these problematic behaviors are associated with a wide range of negative outcomes for children and adolescents. In recent years, mindfulness-based interventions have become increasingly popular and have been shown to improve the ability to sustain attention and concentration, decrease impulsivity, help calm down and relax, increase frustration tolerance, and reduce stress; which enables the individual to respond with greater choice and solve problems and daily difficulties with greater skill. This chapter makes use of a narrative review format to describe the intervention procedure, duration, and process of each of the therapies along with existing research evidence in support of these therapies, and concludes with recommendations for further research.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-6684-9983-2.ch014

INTRODUCTION

Symptoms of common mental disorders in childhood and adolescence have been broadly organized into two dimensions – internalizing and externalizing behaviors. Internalizing dimension includes behaviors such as social withdrawal, anxiety, and depression; whereas, in externalizing dimension, behavioral problems are manifested in the child’s outward behavior as they negatively act out on the external environment. These problematic behaviors include poor impulse control, impulsivity, and inattention, resulting in various acting out, disruptive, rule-breaking, aggression, delinquent, hyperactive, and aggressive behaviors (Campbell et al. 2000; Eisenberg et al. 2001). Within the externalizing dimension, there are two major categories of behavioral problems: problems associated with attention deficits, impulsivity, and hyperactivity (attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder), and disruptive behavioral problems (oppositional defiant disorder and conduct disorder). Untreated externalizing behaviors in children and adolescents can have far-reaching consequences for individuals, families, communities, and society as a whole. Although the experience of externalizing symptoms for some individuals is limited to childhood and adolescence, there is increasing recognition that externalizing disorders continue into adulthood or cause substantial impairment that may persist into adulthood (Sengupta and Shivalkar 2007). These repercussions include an increased risk of academic failure, unemployment, relationship difficulties, substance abuse, delinquency, and incarceration (Moffitt 2015; Fergusson et al. 2005; Champion et al. 1995; Offord and Bennett 1994). Further, externalizing disorders are a public health concern as they substantially burden the health care, education, and legal resources in the community. Given the individual, familial, and societal costs of externalizing behaviors and long-term adverse consequences, there is a dire need to develop effective intervention programs to resolve these issues and prevent them from spilling into adulthood. Although there are several psychosocial interventions targeted at managing externalizing disorders in children and adolescents, most therapies either have insufficient research evidence or outcome measures have a low to medium effect size.

In recent years, mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) are becoming increasingly popular. Although these interventions were initially designed for the adult population, there has been a shift in the last decade towards incorporating mindfulness with children and adolescents as well. However, despite promising results, there appears to be a reluctance when it comes to using mindfulness in treating children and adolescents. This may be possibly due to a lack of awareness of this intervention or misconceptions that children and adolescents may not be able to practice mindfulness or may not benefit from it. Therefore, there is a need to increase awareness and knowledge about mindfulness-based interventions that are currently being explored for children and adolescents with externalizing disorders. This chapter intends to summarize the existing literature and research to give a consolidated overview of mindfulness-based interventions for externalizing disorders of childhood and adolescence.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The main aim of this chapter is to elucidate evidence-based psychotherapeutic approaches that incorporate mindfulness as a key element in addressing externalizing disorders. The objective is to offer a comprehensive summary of established mindfulness-based therapeutic interventions with manuals, which have been both utilized and investigated in the context of treating externalizing disorders in children and adolescents.

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