

Mindfulness Approaches for Addressing Substance Use Concerns



A conversation starter for substance use service providers

WHY MINDFULNESS?

Mindfulness approaches can support reducing substance use and compulsive behaviours, managing cravings, preventing relapse, improving mood, and increasing engagement in treatment among people with substance use concerns [1]. There is evidence that mindfulness interventions address the neurobiological underpinnings of addiction and reward processing [2].

Mindfulness is a trauma informed approach that has evidence-based effects in the brain similar to those of methamphetamine addiction. Similar brain regions and circuits are involved in both addiction and mindfulness. One is the top-down pathway associated with self-regulation of thoughts, emotions, and behaviors controlled by the prefrontal cortex, and includes inhibitory control and working memory. Another is the bottom-up pathway which directly controls stimulation and emotion. Mindfulness causes a decrease in the activity of brain regions involved in both stimulation and emotion (amygdala and posterior putamen) [3].

Mindfulness-based approaches have been supported by research

Here are three examples of mindfulness-based interventions that have been helpful for people who use stimulants. There are many opportunities to integrate and adapt aspects of these interventions into your treatment context.

1. Mindfulness-Based Relapse Prevention (MBRP) is rooted in self-compassion and harm reduction. MBRP has been found effective in reducing cravings and helping those with substance use disorders manage withdrawal [4] through creating awareness, non-judgmental acceptance of experiences such as cravings, and reinforcing that the uncomfortable sensations and urges will eventually pass on their own without taking a substance. MBRP has been applied along with other treatment programs, such as contingency management [5] or ketamine infusion [6], or offered as part of aftercare. It has been found to be useful for a range of populations, including women with a history of incarceration in live-in treatment [7, 8] and people with stimulant dependence who also have a mood or anxiety disorder [5].

To learn more, listen to a [podcast](#) with Dr. Sarah Bowen, a leading researcher of MBRP.

2. Mindfulness-Oriented Recovery Enhancement (MORE) combines concepts from mindfulness, cognitive behavioural therapy, and positive psychology to simultaneously address substance use disorders, chronic pain, and stress. Its core components are the reappraisal of stressful life events (making meaning) and savouring (focusing attention on pleasant sensations and positive emotions).

To learn more, listen to a [podcast](#) with Dr. Eric Garland who developed MORE.

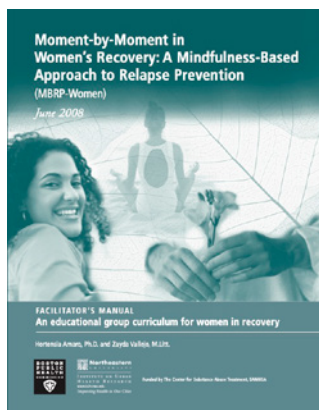
3. Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) aims to enhance connection to the present moment, identify values, and move to committed action in accordance with one's values. The intervention focuses on 6 key elements: diffusion, acceptance, presence, self, values, and commitment to action [8]. ACT has been found to reduce aggressiveness among men with methamphetamine use disorder and its corresponding psychosis [9].

[Click here](#) for a detailed, session-by-session outline of evidence-based manualized mindfulness programs for substance use disorders, along with their outcomes.

WHAT ARE SOME CONSIDERATIONS FOR WORKING WITH SPECIFIC POPULATIONS?

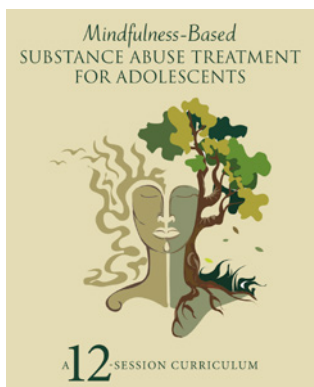
There are many approaches that incorporate mindfulness techniques. However, what may work for one person may not be suitable for the next. Offering choices and working together with service users to develop a tailored approach provides an opportunity to think about how factors such as sex, gender, age, race/ethnicity, and experiences of trauma might be considered. For example, researchers have theorized that MORE may be beneficial for mothers who use(d) opioids during pregnancy to improve mother and child wellbeing [10].

Mindfulness approaches that have been created with specific populations in mind:



[Moment-by-Moment in Women's Recovery: A Mindfulness-Based Approach to Relapse Prevention](#)

– This program manual describes a group intervention that is tailored for women in substance use treatment, who may also have a history of trauma and be experiencing mental health concerns. The manual includes guided meditations, exercises, poems, and other helpful resources that could be used and adapted in your work. The research findings point to improved retention in live-in treatment as well as improved psychological wellbeing among women who mostly used amphetamine/methamphetamine and had a history of incarceration [11].



[Mindfulness-Based Substance Abuse Treatment for Adolescents: A 12 Session Curriculum](#)

– This group mindfulness intervention was created for young people with substance use concerns. Among boys age 18-21 with a methamphetamine use disorder, the intervention was associated with improvements in functions associated with craving, including response inhibition, risky decision-making, working memory, and cognitive functions [12]. The Center for Adolescent Studies offers a [free course](#) to learn how to teach mindfulness to teens.

[Dr. Michael Yellow Bird](#) has highlighted how mindfulness, as both a traditional and contemporary Indigenous practice, can support wellness and be a powerful tool in dealing with racism, loss of land, culture, language, and poverty. He offers activities that promote mindfulness which may be helpful when working with Indigenous people who use methamphetamines. All responses should be guided by the Peoples and communities who are accessing treatment.



HOW CAN MINDFULNESS BE INTEGRATED INTO YOUR PRACTICE?

There are many options for integrating mindfulness into your practice. The interventions listed above are programs that could be adapted to your treatment setting. However, mindfulness practices can also be integrated into treatment you already offer, or be offered to service users as part of aftercare and treatment maintenance.

Practical Handouts:

Handouts can be useful when working with service users.

- [Mindfulness-Based Relapse Prevention handouts](#)
- [Worksheets for people who use methamphetamine from Australia's Drug Aware program](#)

These handouts are specific to methamphetamine use and have mindfulness concepts embedded in their tips and prompts.

- Check out the managing withdrawal section in this resource from New Zealand (NZ): [Te Hikuwai resources for wellbeing: Methamphetamine use/ Tioata whakaihi](#)
- Also from NZ, [P**d Off](#) provides an example of mindfulness concepts integrated into tips for dealing with craving, and a guide to relaxation.

Guided meditations:

Many guided meditations can be found online. Here are some that are designed for people with substance use concerns:

- [Practice Mindfulness-Based Relapse Prevention](#)
- [Practice Mindfulness-Oriented Recovery Enhancement](#)
- [Practice Acceptance and Commitment Therapy](#)
- [Tara Brach: Working with Desire, Attachment and Addictions](#)

Formal mindfulness

practice: meditation & other guided exercises (e.g., body scan) [13].

Informal mindfulness

practice: bringing awareness, acceptance, & compassion into everyday activities & challenging situations [13].

Virtual Reality Meditation for Addiction



Reflection questions:

- » What are the opportunities for incorporating or enhancing mindfulness approaches into your work?
- » How can mindfulness practices be tailored for specific populations in your treatment setting?

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