

Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy for Cancer

Orientation Handout

* Materials adapted from Trish Bartley, 2012, 2017, Wiley-Blackwell; Z. Segal et al, 2013, The Guildford Press, and Patricia Rockman 2017, The Centre for Mindfulness Studies.

Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy for Cancer (MBCT-Ca) is a program for people with cancer or those who have had cancer. It provides an opportunity to learn ways of managing reactions to the many stressors and difficulties associated with a cancer diagnosis.

We refer to the act of doing mindfulness as “mindfulness practice.” Our difficulties may not disappear, but through practice we can learn a way of being with them more gently

Mindfulness practice is really a love affair with what we might call truth, which includes beauty, the unknown and how things actually are, embedded in this very moment.

-Jon Kabat-Zinn, 1990

Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) was introduced by Jon Kabat-Zinn in 1979 at the University of Massachusetts's Medical Centre. This 8-week program drew upon 2500 years of Eastern contemplative traditions, integrated with modern science. Initially, the program was introduced as an additional support for people with chronic and/or treatment resistant conditions.

MBSR is now offered across the world. The very popular Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) evolved from MBSR with a focus on people living with depression and, more recently, anxiety. It was introduced by Segal, Williams and Teasdale in 1999 and continues to grow in popularity and reach. Collectively, these two interventions are among the well-researched mental health interventions in the world, with more than 75,000 published research papers.

The Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy for Cancer (MBCT-Ca) program we are entering into together was developed by Trish Bartley and her colleagues in Wales. MBCT-Ca is an evolution of Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy. It also includes elements of another program called Mindfulness Based Cancer Recovery (Carlson and Speca, 2010). MBCT-Ca is evidence-based, with demonstrated benefit to those suffering to those living with cancer.

The diagnosis and treatment of cancer can disrupt our view of ourselves and our lives. We might experience distress during diagnosis and treatment, as well as after treatment. Mindfulness provides us with an alternative way of approaching distress-- a middle way between attempting to escape from painful feelings and getting caught in unhelpful thinking patterns as we try to cope with them.

Working with Difficulty in a New Way

Mindfulness offers new ways of relating to difficulty and distress. The classes and home practice help you learn to develop new habits of mind, and to be more fully aware and present in each moment. The good news is that this makes life more interesting, vivid and fulfilling. On the other hand, this means facing what is present, even when it is unpleasant and or unwanted.

Turning to face and acknowledge difficulties, rather than avoiding them, can be an effective way to reduce anxiety and rumination. Once aware, we have the opportunity interrupt unhelpful patterns before they progress into more intense negative mood states. Awareness, even in the face of difficulty, also allows for the possibility of responding in ways that better support wellness.

In the group, you will learn gentle ways to face difficulties with a sense of kindness and compassion to yourself. It is important to know that turning toward difficulty is hard work. With awareness, and with practice, you will begin to learn when symptoms are unpleasant and when they are overwhelming, and how to best care for yourself in each situation.

If you have any questions, or if you feel overwhelmed, know that it's always ok to take a break from practice and contact us so we can set up a time to discuss. We are not available on an emergency basis so it's important that you also have a primary health care provider or therapist you can reach out to if you need additional support or are feeling overwhelmed for any reason.

Knowing your Window of Tolerance

Window of tolerance is a term used to describe the zone of arousal within which a person is most able to function.

Knowing Your Window of Tolerance

Fight or Flight Mode

- Experiencing the urge to flee or leave immediately
- Experiencing overwhelming images, memories, anxiety, or worries
- Unable to learn and take in new information

Window Of Tolerance

- Able to safely be with and explore your experience, even when it is uncomfortable or unpleasant**
- Able to learn and take in new information; from self & others**

Freeze Mode

- Feeling numb or disconnected
- Feeling out of tune with thoughts, emotions, and physical sensations
- Unable to learn and take in new information

Window of Tolerance (Ogden, et al. (2006); Siegel, 1999)

When you are within your Window of Tolerance, you are to readily receive, process and integrate information, and to respond to the demands of a situation. During times of distress a person might move outside the Window of Tolerance into a state of fight or flight (hyper-arousal) or freeze (hypo-arousal). In these states an individual is no longer able to process or integrate information effectively and may develop feelings of dysregulation. Each person's Window of Tolerance is different and can vary depending upon present and past circumstances.

If you feel outside your Window of Tolerance we encourage you to take a break and take care of yourself.

You might consider one or more of the following:

1. Opening your eyes
2. Standing up
3. Feeling your feet on the ground
4. Stretching
5. Taking slow in-breaths with longer outbreaths
6. Drinking a glass of water
7. Making a warm beverage
8. Wrapping yourself in a blanket or sweater
9. Naming five things you can see or hear, and describing them in detail.
10. Splashing cold water on your face
11. Or anything you feel might be helpful.

If possible, please let us know if you need to step away from the session because you are outside of your Window of Tolerance, or even if you just need to take a break for some other reason.

Home Practice

Mindfulness offers new ways of relating to experience, but it is based on experiential learning and requires practice.

Together, we will be working to become aware and to change patterns of mind that may have been around for a long time. Changes patterns and habits require time and effort.

This approach depends on your ability and willingness to do home practice between the group sessions. We assign approximately 30 minutes each day of meditation practice as well as brief informal practices and cognitive exercises that you will weave through your day.

As the group progresses, we work on balancing the discipline required for home practice with kindness to yourself and making choices on how to best care for yourself in any given moment, day, and week. This will be different for each person, and we will discuss the best path forward for you during the intake meeting.

We will provide you with materials and home practice instructions at the end of each session.

Program Guidelines

Sessions will start on time. We are available at least 15 minutes prior to the start of session to assist with technology or answer any questions. Starting in week 2, we will have informal conversations in the 15 minutes prior to the start of session. Please try to arrive on time, but if you find yourself running late or needing to leave early, please come anyways! You are always welcome. You might need to wait a moment or two in the Zoom waiting room, but we will let you in as soon as one of us notices.

It's important that you login from a private space, where your screen cannot be seen by anyone else in your household and where the session cannot be overheard. We are happy to help you with ideas on how to set up a private space if you need support.

See if it's possible to turn off your phone during session and give yourself the gift of uninterrupted time. If you know you will need to leave during session for any reason, please let us know.

Everything that occurs during the sessions is completely confidential and we will discuss confidentiality at our first meeting with the group.

During each session there will be opportunities to discuss what arises in practice done in-session and during home practice. Discussion will, for the most part, focus on present moment experiences noticed during the practices. This program is not a "self-help" group, with limited sharing of personal stories. We also want to avoid reassuring or giving advice to other participants so that everyone is allowed to have and share their experience just as it is.

Some participants like to contribute a lot during the sessions and some participants prefer to be quiet. It can be an act of generosity to listen and allow others to speak, and an act of generosity to share your experience so that others may learn.

If you are not able to make a session or have something to discuss, please email us and we will set up a time to speak. We are always open to discussing your experience in the program.

Alison Kelford, MD and Rhea Plosker RSW RP