

A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF PEER-REVIEWED JOURNAL ARTICLES:
HOW IS MINDFULNESS APPLIED IN COUPLES THERAPY
IN THE MENTAL HEALTH FIELD?

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DEDICATION

For My Father

I am the woman I am today because of the unconditional love you have bestowed upon me since the day I was born. This accomplishment would not have been possible without your steadfast belief in me.

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As my current academic adventure comes to a close I find myself feeling grateful to have had this experience exactly at this time in my life. I could not have made it through this academic adventure without the love and support of so many incredible loving individuals. My heart is grateful for each experience that I have had along the way and for each of you who have been with me throughout and those that have passed for through for only a moment. My journey to get to this place has been a full of twist and turns. I am overwhelmed by the richness and fullness that I find in my life right now.

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ABSTRACT

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A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF PEER-REVIEWED JOURNAL ARTICLES: HOW IS MINDFULNESS APPLIED IN COUPLES THERAPY IN THE MENTAL HEALTH FIELD?

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The rationale behind this study is to understand how mental health professionals currently use and apply mindfulness in couples therapy. This study was guided by two primary research questions: “Since 2000, how are mindfulness interventions and techniques applied in couples therapy in the mental health profession with relationship to understanding variables such as well-being, empathy, self-esteem, and emotional regulation?” and “How have researchers explored and expanded the usefulness of mindfulness in evidenced based research journals specific to couple therapy in the mental health profession with particular examination on relationship satisfaction?”

This study included articles retrieved from peer reviewed scholarly research journals with emphasis on the mental health profession. Articles that were published between 2000—2017 content pertaining to mindfulness in couples therapy were retrieved for analysis. There were 13 peer-reviewed scholarly journal articles that met the final criteria for inclusion in this study.

The coding procedure began by developing a coding form to assist the coding team in analyzing the collected data. The final sample of 13 articles were then coded for relevant information applicable to mindfulness in couples therapy. There were three major themes that emerged from the coding process; mindfulness was found to have a positive effect in relationship satisfaction, emotional reactivity and acceptance and awareness. These themes give insight into how mindfulness is being applied and used in the mental health field in couples therapy.

The potential benefits of mindfulness on relationships have only recently begun to be explored. The results of this content analysis have multiple implications for researchers to add to the understanding and application of mindfulness in the mental health profession with emphasis on the benefits of mindfulness in regard to relationships. For example, the application of mindfulness in couples therapy was found to have a positive change in relationship satisfaction, emotional reactivity and acceptance and awareness.

In summary, mindfulness is not just a tool or technique, it is a way of being (Kabat-Zinn, 1990). Shapiro and Carlson (2017) stated that, “Mindfulness is both a process (mindful practice) and an outcome (mindful awareness)” (p. 10). Understanding that mindfulness has tools and techniques that can be taught to individuals and couples to benefit their lives can be confusing due to the fact that there is not a definitive understanding of the mechanisms underlying the positive changes reported in research study results. Blending ancient philosophies of the East into the Western world of modern

science is indeed encircled with challenges; and yet, the possibilities of bringing these two epistemologies together creates enormous potential and opportunities to diminish the suffering of clients in the mental health profession.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Mindfulness is a deeply rooted paradigm based in Buddhist and Hinduism practice and philosophy, dating back 2000 years (Kabat-Zinn, 1982). A simple definition of mindfulness is described as the awareness of one's thoughts, feelings and surroundings at any given moment, without judgment (Kabat-Zinn, 1982). Mindfulness entails accepting one's thoughts, feelings and emotions without judgment (Evans, Ferrand, Carr, & Haglin, 2011). Practicing mindfulness allows one to be in the present moment without ruminating about the past or getting lost in the "what ifs" of the future. Hanley, Abell, Osborn, Roehrig, and Canto (2016) stated that mindfulness encompasses how an individual pays attention to the current moment without giving any judgment to the situation. These definitions and descriptions of mindfulness imply that it is a way of relating without judgment and most important it is an intentional process.

Mindfulness as a concept has begun to emerge as a viable technique among therapists (Davis & Hayes, 2011). Mindfulness became popularized in 1979 when Jon Kabat-Zinn developed an 8-week mindfulness program entitled mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR), which is based on the principles and teaching of Buddhadharma (Kabat-Zinn, 2011). Given the cultural climate in 1979, Kabat-Zinn was concerned with how the medical and scientific community would relate to a program that at its core was based on the Buddhist philosophy and practices (Kabat-Zinn, 2011), so he

chose to refrain from using any traditional language or terms within the program curriculum.

Mindfulness-based stress reduction began as a pilot program in the Stress Reduction Clinic at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center in 1979. Since that time, the program has become the basis for countless studies and interventions within the domains of psychiatry, psychology, medicine, government, education, and corporations around the globe (William & Kabat-Zinn, 2011). The number of evidenced-based research papers on the topic of mindfulness have increased exponentially since the inception of MBSR, particularly in the last decade. The National Institute of Health (NIH) published less than 100 scientific papers on the topic of mindfulness in 2004, but by 2016, over 800 scientific papers were published by the NIH (Ludwig & Kabat-Zinn 2008; NIH, 2017). The Stress Reduction Clinic at the University of Massachusetts Medical School was the first hospital system to implement a mindfulness program specifically targeting those patients that were not responding to traditional medicine as an alternative to mitigate their pain and suffering. There are now over 700 medical centers, hospitals and clinics that have implemented mindfulness as part of the integrative healthcare plan for treatment of their patients worldwide (Schlieter, 2017).

Integrated Mindfulness Models

Research on mindfulness interventions and applications in the mental health profession are primarily within the field of behavioral sciences, including models such as dialectic behavioral therapy (DBT), mindfulness based cognitive therapy (MBCT), accept and commitment therapy (ACT), and mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR). All of

these models have integrated or adapted aspects of mindfulness into their therapeutic interventions (Crane et al., 2017; Davis & Hayes, 2011). These mindfulness interventions have shown success in treating chronic pain, borderline personality disorder, eating disorders, depression and anxiety (Gambrel & Keeling, 2010). For example, MBCT and MBSR both incorporate body scans, walking meditation, sitting meditation, weekly formal and informal instruction on mindfulness, in order to reduce stress, depression, anxiety and chronic pain (Shapiro & Carlson, 2017; Teasdale et al., 2000).

Davis and Hayes (2011) stated that studies continue to provide evidence that mindfulness increases positive emotional regulation while decreasing negative emotional reactivity. The most recent systemic review of literature focused on the effectiveness of mindfulness on both psychological and physical conditions; the review study found that overall outcomes were significantly increased when MBSR or MBCT programs were used to reduce stress, anxiety and depression, (Modi, Abbot, Dickens, Dunna, & Keil, 2017). The results showed a higher rate of effectiveness in reducing psychological problems versus physical problems; the author's also noted in the article that physical and psychological problems are many times comorbid.

Mindfulness in Couples Therapy

As evidence-based research continues to accumulate on the benefits of mindfulness interventions for individuals, thus far there has been minimal research investigating the possible benefits in couples therapy or family therapy (Gehart & McCollum, 2007). Given the explosive interest in mindfulness there is room for increased research into how therapists can integrate mindfulness into their therapeutic models as

well as therapeutic stance (Shapiro & Carlson, 2017). Current research on mindfulness in couples therapy has primarily been in the area of quantitative research design, utilizing descriptive statistical analysis to determine if there is a relationship between trait mindfulness facet and variables such as stress. There have been few studies employing randomized control trials with couples. Regardless of the possible misinterpretation, the current studies available provide a starting point for investigating how mindfulness interventions could be integrated into couples therapy based on the efficacy of mindfulness in assisting individuals improve their lives (Gehart & McCollum, 2007; Hanley et al., 2016). An increase in RCT studies would give a better understanding of how the application of MBSR could benefit couples therapy.

Statement of the Problem

Researchers have demonstrated that, as a tool, mindfulness has a multitude of applications in a broad spectrum of areas from medicine to human resources in corporations (Crane et al., 2017). The existing research articles on mindfulness and its application are predominantly published in medical, psychiatric, psychology and religious journals. There is limited research literature regarding mindfulness in scholarly research journals that focus on couples therapy across the mental health professions. Mindfulness has been shown to have numerous benefits associated with health and personal well-being including reducing anxiety, stress, and depression while improving self-esteem and self-awareness (Williams & Kabat-Zinn, 2011). While the individual aspects of the benefits have been empirically examined over the last four decades, the examination of the interpersonal influences of mindfulness have been inferred, but not

examined (Davis & Hayes, 2011). Therefore, couples therapists seeking information on the application and uses of mindfulness techniques and interventions are left with few resources that focus on couples. Considering that vast empirical evidence concerning the positive impact mindfulness has on individuals, there is a need for further exploration and examination into how mindfulness can contribute to couples therapy in the mental health field with the emphasis on relationship satisfaction and the interpersonal influences of mindfulness.

Statement of the Purpose

The rationale behind this study was to understand how mental health professionals currently use and apply mindfulness interventions and techniques in couples therapy. This study included scholarly journal articles to ascertain how and to what extent mental health professionals are using mindfulness in couples therapy. The impetus for understanding how and to what extent mental health professionals are using mindfulness in couples therapy is to help mental health professionals become familiar with the applications of mindfulness and how it can help enhance couples therapy outcomes. The variables that were the focus of this study were the following: empathy, wellbeing, self-esteem, emotional regulation, as well as relationship satisfaction.

The guiding principle behind this study was to discern what has been written about the application and usefulness of mindfulness in couples therapy in scholarly journals across the mental health field. This content analysis included peer-reviewed articles from 2000—2017 to provide a comprehensive review of mindfulness in couples therapy. Prior to 2000, there were few scientific publications on mindfulness application and

interventions in the mental health field directly related to couples therapy. This study analyzed themes and findings generated from the evidence-based studies published in peer-reviewed journals; these themes and findings were examined to provide greater understanding of how mindfulness impacts couples therapy in regard to relationship satisfaction, well-being, empathy, emotional regulation and self-esteem.

Research Questions

Therefore, the following research questions guided this study:

1. How is mindfulness intervention applied in couples therapy studies in the mental health profession in relationship to empathy, wellbeing, emotional regulation and self-esteem?
2. How have evidence-based research studies explored and expanded the understanding of mindfulness in evidence-based research journals specific to couples therapy in the mental health profession and in particular the examination of relationship satisfaction?

The research questions assisted the researcher in procuring the articles for data collection.

Definition of Terms

The translation of Buddhist teachings lends itself to many interpretations; for the purpose of this study the words used to define the complexities of the terms were chosen based on the most universal understandings the researcher could find and interpret. The following terms were applied to this study:

1. *Mindfulness* can be defined as paying attention in a particular way; on purpose, in the present moment and nonjudgmentally (Kabat-Zinn, 1982).
2. *Mindfulness Meditation* can be defined as the practice of being mindful of internal and external processes simultaneously, it includes attentive listening, being flexible in response and acknowledgment of bias and judgment (Bellin, 2015).
3. *Vipassana* can be defined as the practice of insight meditation in which breathing, thoughts and actions, are being used to gain insight towards attainment enlightenment (Chadha, 2015).
4. *Dukkha* is known in Buddhist translation as suffering, anxiety, stress- the goal of Buddhist principles is the cessation of suffering (Loy, 2014).
5. *Buddha* is defined as One who has awakened; in the Buddhist teaching one who has yet to acknowledge dukkha lives life unaware of his true being (Loy, 2014).
6. *Dharma* contains many meanings; at its core are three elements, the words of Buddha, the practice of his teachings, and the attainment of enlightenment (Sun, 2014).

Assumptions

The following assumptions guided the researcher:

1. Mindfulness meditation is a universal practice which allows for anyone to use it regardless of religious or spiritual beliefs (Kabat-Zinn, 1982).
2. The mental health field could benefit from understanding the usefulness of applying mindfulness techniques and interventions in couples therapy.

3. This researcher assumed that the application of mindfulness will be appropriate for the clinical issue and provided by therapists trained in mindfulness techniques.

Delimitations

The delimitations for this study are the following:

1. This content analysis consisted of peer-reviewed articles from scholarly journals published from 2000—2017 which focus on mindfulness in couples therapy.
2. The search terms in this study included: mindful, mindfulness, mindfulness meditation, meditation, family therapy, family counseling, couples therapy, couples counseling. These terms guided the researcher to articles that are relevant to the research questions stated above.

Summary

Shapiro and Carlson (2017) stated that mindfulness can be defined as an awareness that arises out of intentionally paying attention to one's thoughts with an open, kind and discerning way. Given that mindfulness has been empirically studied in both psychological and medical journals, it was this researcher's goal to understand what has been written about mindfulness in scholarly journals related to couples therapy in the mental health profession. This chapter also introduced evidenced-based research on the benefits associated with the application of mindfulness for physical and psychological disorders as well as possible benefits associated with relationship issues.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

This study sought to ascertain what has been written about the application and usefulness of mindfulness techniques and interventions in couples therapy and in the mental health profession. This chapter provided a literature review of mindfulness in the mental health profession, as well medicine and neuroscience to provide a comprehensive review of the usefulness of mindfulness techniques and interventions currently being applied. This literature review does not include articles from the research sample.

Theoretical Framework

Mindfulness

Mindfulness originated within the Buddhist philosophy in accordance with the Abhidharma, which was taught as a non-sectarian practice specifically in the West. It was also used as a meditation practice in the ancient times according to Buddhist tradition, principles and values (Kabat-Zinn, 2011). These Buddhist teachings and principles are what mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) is based upon but never spoken of directly, the four noble truths and the eight paths to enlightenment are taught without acknowledging or using the specific words or phrases (Farb, 2014). Creating space for the two epistemologies to coexist that of Buddhist teachings and the science of the west for the utilization of secular population is fraught with challenges (Farb, 2014; Kabat-Zinn, 2011; Williams & Kabat-Zinn, 2011). The task of bringing the ancient

teachings to modern society in a way that would give as many patients the opportunity to learn a way of alleviating their own pain and suffering was the motivation behind the development of MBSR (Kabat-Zinn, 1990; Williams & Kabat-Zinn, 2011).

Fennell and Segal (2011) related mindfulness with mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT), wherein an unlikely partnership is established between the Buddhist tradition of mindfulness meditation and the clinical work of cognitive behavioral therapy. The development of mindfulness can be better comprehended from its evolution as a practice along with a theoretical interest by mental health professionals. Bellin (2015) stated that mindfulness meditation has been established as an effective intervention for treating humans suffering from addiction, anxiety and depression.

Mindfulness evokes vibrant discussions regarding the association existing between Buddhism, secular mindfulness and cultural imperialism (Sun, 2014). Kabat-Zinn (2011) asserts, that mindfulness can only be understood from an internal perspective, in other words, from a first-person experience. Mindfulness should not be confused with a cognitive behavioral technique that is employed to produce change within a behavioral model; instead, mindfulness is a way of being, a way of seeing life without predetermined expectations, embracing the true nature of our mind and bodies with compassion, a way of living a life that has depth and meaning (Kabat-Zinn, 1990; Williams & Kabat-Zinn, 2011).

Neuroscience Findings

Neuroscience is on the leading edge of understanding what parts of the brain are influenced by mindfulness interventions (Shapiro & Carlson, 2017). The following areas are examples of the burgeoning interest in how mindfulness effects emotional regulation, memory, depression and anxiety in the field of neuroscience.

Emotional regulation. Research studies on mindfulness-based stress reduction and mindfulness-based cognitive therapy continue to increase with on-going research related to how mindfulness is associated with the reduction of emotional and physical suffering while increasing emotional well-being. Researchers have also found a positive connection in the benefits of using mindfulness in regulating emotional reactivity in the brain. For example, Farb et al. (2010) conducted a randomized study to examine the effect of MBSR on emotional regulation. Farb et al. (2010) used magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) to measure the brain activity in cortical midline to better understand the effects of mindfulness training on the area of the brain that is responsible for emotional regulation.

Participants in the study were recruited from the St. Joseph's Health Care Center in Toronto Canada. All 36 participants in this study were right-handed, each participant had an MRI scan prior to the study beginning, 12 females and four males, were assigned to the waitlist, and 15 females and five males, were assigned to the MBSR program. Three measures were taken pre- and post-intervention: Beck's Depression Inventory-2 (BDI-II), Beck's Anxiety Inventory (BAI) and The Symptom Checklist 90 Revised

(SCL-90-R) all of which have well documented and acceptable validity and reliability scores.

Farb et al. (2010) found that participants in the 8-week MBSR training showed significantly less neural activity after watching sad films than those in the control waitlisted group. Hence, Farb et al. (2010) were able to link less neural activity in the midline cortical to greater capacity of emotional regulation with mindfulness training. Participants also had significantly less anxiety, depressive and somatic distress compared to the control group (Farb et al., 2010).

Way, Creswell, Eisenberger, and Liberman (2010) further explored the connection between neural activity, depression and mindfulness. Way et al. (2010) conducted a study using MRI imaging to assess the neural reactivity of the brain response to fixation, shapes and emotional faces and depression specifically looking at the amygdala reactivity during rest. Way et al. (2010) sought to understand the dispositional mindfulness trait in relation to depression. There were 27 undergraduate students, 16 females and 11 males, from UCLA were recruited for this study.

Three measures were taken pre-and post-intervention: Beck's Depression Index (BDI), Mindful Attention Awareness Scale (MAAS) and Spielberger's State Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI). Way et al. (2010) found that the amygdala was less active in participants who had a higher degree of dispositional mindfulness leading researchers to conclude that mindfulness training can mitigate depressive symptoms. Way et al. (2010) noted that more randomized controlled studies are warranted in order to understand the

underlying complexities of how mindfulness works on other areas of the brain in alleviating depressive symptoms (Way et al., 2010).

Memory. Chambers, Lo, and Allen (2008) investigated the relationship between executive cognition and psychological wellbeing. Researchers used a quantitative research design to investigate to what extent a 10-day intensive MBSR training would impact performance, working memory capacity, depression, rumination and attention. Participants were recruited from the University of Melbourne, as well as Aloka Vipassana Centre in Victoria, Australia; 11 men and nine, women between the ages of 21 to 57 were assigned to MBSR training. The control group consisted of psychology students from the University of Melbourne; nine men and 11, women were assigned to the waitlist group between the ages of 22 to 63, both groups were similar in age and gender distribution.

This quantitative study used repeated measures to investigate the relationship between mindful awareness, rumination, affect and executive cognition. Chambers et al. employed the following instruments in this study, Mindfulness Attention Awareness Scale (MAAS), Ruminative Response Scale (RRS), Beck Depression Inventory (BDI-2), Beck Anxiety Inventory (BAI), and Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS). The performance instruments applied to this study included the Digital Span Backward (DSB) and the Internal Switching Task (IST); these instruments measured the reaction time of switching from one task to the next. Independent mean scores for each instrument were run to evaluate significance in the two groups by comparing t-tests.

The only significance found was in the MAAS and BDI at Time I (prior to training) with the MBSR group. Chambers et al. (2008) found significant results when comparing the scores of the MBSR and the control group on the MAAS, RSS, BDI, PANAS after the 8-week MBSR training program. Chambers et al. (2008) found a significant improvement in the MBSR group in each category when compared to the control group.

Jha, Stanly, Kiyonaga, Wong and Geland (2010) studied military groups during pre-deployment at a time when stress levels, anxiety and depression are prevalent. The researchers sought to understand the relationship between mindfulness training (MT) and working memory capacity (WMC) and how MT could potentially impact WMC by reducing stress and anxiety. The study included 48 military units preparing to be deployed, all were males between 25 to 34 years old. A total of 17 military cohorts and 12 civilians were assigned to control groups and 31 were assigned to MT group. Scores on PANAS were used to measure affect and Ospan was used to measure differences in problem solving before and after mindfulness training. Jha et al. (2010) ran ANOVA to determine the statistical differences between the groups at T1 and T2. Jha et al. (2010) found that the 8-week MBSR training significantly increased the ability of the military soldiers to maintain information and perform complicated tasks.

Mindfulness Application with Chronic Pain

Chronic pain. Kabat-Zinn (1982) conducted a study with participants suffering from chronic pain, seeking to understand if an 8-week mindfulness program could reduce chronic pain or reduce the pain related behavior. A total of 51 participants, ages 22 to 75,

went through the mindfulness training in one of three cycles. Baseline pain measures were taken prior to the mindfulness training which included: McGill-Melzack Pain Rating Index (PDI), Body Parts Problem Assessment (BPPA), a three-color Dermatome Pain Map (DPM), and Table of Levels Interference (TLI). Other health measures were also taken that included: Medical Symptoms Check List (MSCL), Profile of Mood State (POMS), Total Mood Disturbance (TMD), Multidimensional Health Locus of Control (MHLC), and follow up questionnaires.

The mindfulness training consisted of 2 hours per week for 10 weeks of mindfulness meditation instruction, daily homework included 45 minutes of guided meditation, yoga or breathing exercise played on audio cassette tape. On completion of the mindfulness training, participants reported on the study pain measures that their pain was reduced by 33% to 50%. Moreover, the study noted that the patients had recorded a greater increase in their self-esteem. A 15-month follow-up, indicated that the chronic pain had continued to improve through mindfulness meditation. The study also noted that the patients now experienced a sense of peace, the capacity to stay present, as well the ability to cope with daily life stressors (Kabat-Zinn, 1982).

Therapists Mindfulness Application

Training. Evidence-based research has recently commenced on how therapists and trainees can use mindfulness in both their professional and personal lives. Davis and Hayes (2011) found that mindfulness training may provide improve core competency skills for beginning therapists by allowing beginning therapist to stay present in session and attuned to their clients' needs. Schure, Christopher, and Christopher (2008)

conducted a 4-year qualitative research study (across multiple semesters) to determine if mindfulness would enhance trainees' counseling skills. A total of 33 first year graduate students enrolled in mental health counseling, school counseling or marriage and family counseling took the elective "Mind/Body Medicine" and the "Art of Self Care" as part of 15 weeks of mindfulness training. The participants ranged in age from 20 to 50 and included 27 females and 7 males; there were 30 White participants, three Japanese participants, and one Native American participant. After completing the course, counseling students reported having a better tolerance for silence in therapy sessions, an increased awareness of themselves and their clients simultaneously, as well as being more attentive in session. These students continued to practice mindfulness and were part of the ongoing study throughout their family therapy program.

McCollum and Gehart (2010) conducted a study on mindfulness training with students in the family therapy program having them engage in mindfulness training as part of their coursework over the semester. Students were required to keep weekly journal as part of the course requirement to track the effects mindfulness training had on their daily lives. The impetus of this study, according to McCollum and Gerhart (2010) was to help students cultivate core competencies skills through integrating mindfulness as part of their curriculum. The author's noted in the article that the most difficult thing to teach novice therapists is to stay attuned and present with their clients, the goal of introducing mindfulness as part of their curriculum was to help promote empathy, acceptance and awareness of themselves and others and to remain present and in the moment during therapy sessions.

McCollum and Gehart (2010) found that through mindfulness training, students reported a better understanding of themselves and their clients, students also reported that they were able to stay present with their clients in session. Kabat-Zinn (2011) states, that without developing the essence of mindfulness, therapists could get stuck in the client's story. Mindfulness may help trainees and therapists stay present while listening to clients most difficult challenges without judgment or need to immediately fix the problem (Gehart & McCollum, 2007).

Summary

This chapter gave an overview of current literature on applications, benefits, and practice of mindfulness. The existing studies also connect mindfulness to the practice of Buddhists where mindfulness prepares the human body to connect with the mind allowing for a deeper mind-body connection (Kabat-Zinn, 2011). Empirical research studies in psychology and the medical field have continued to link the benefits of mindfulness-based interventions and therapy. Research aimed at understanding the mechanisms behind mindfulness will give more depth and understanding about how mindfulness works in order to further the benefits for clinicians in providing applications of mindfulness to enhance the outcome of therapy in the mental health profession (Shapiro & Carlson, 2017).

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

This chapter provides an overview of content analysis methodology and the procedures employed as this researcher proposed to examine a sample of evidence-based articles that report on the application of mindfulness in couples therapy. This researcher examined how content analysis gives more depth and meaning to the findings in the research sample articles. The content analysis in this study included peer-reviewed articles from 2000—2017 that provided a comprehensive view of mindfulness couples therapy in the mental health profession. This time period was selected because prior to 2000 there were minimal scientific publications addressing mindfulness applications and interventions in the mental health profession in relation to couples therapy.

This study analyzed themes related to the literature provided in the journal articles examined to provide greater understanding of the application and practice of mindfulness in couples therapy in the mental health profession. The purpose of this study was to acquire knowledge about how therapists apply mindfulness to their practice in couples therapy, as well as, what has been written about couples therapy in scholarly journals related to the mental health profession. The purpose in attaining this information was to give greater knowledge to therapists about how to apply mindfulness in therapy and how to enhance therapeutic outcomes.

Krippendorff (2013) stated that “content analysis is a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the context of their use” (p. 24). While text can include artwork, images, symbols, and other artifacts, for this study, text is defined as the written word published in peer-reviewed journals. Content analysis is a scientific and empirically grounded approach to analyze data for the purpose of understanding the depth and meaning of terms and messages within the written word (Neuendorf, 2017). Krippendorff (2013) suggested that contemporary content analysis involuntarily becomes a methodology of its own because it goes beyond the established ideas of intent, content, symbols, and is empirically grounded.

Weber (1990) stated that methodology presents the easiest and most straightforward way of establishing the reliability of research. The effectiveness of content analysis methodology stems from its advantage of allowing for qualitative and quantitative operations working together, essentially quantifying the qualitative data (Cho & Lee, 2014). Content analysis has aided in bridging the gap between qualitative and quantitative data, especially giving researchers the opportunity to analyze perceptual constructs that would not be easy to study using conventional quantitative research methods only (Weber, 1990).

Sample Recruitment

This study included articles retrieved from peer reviewed scholarly research journals with emphasis on the mental health profession. Articles that were published between 2000—2017 with content pertaining to mindfulness in couples therapy were retrieved for analysis. Each of the scholarly journal articles were chosen based on the relevance and impact they have on couples therapy in the mental health profession in one of the following area or areas: training, research, clinical practices and theory.

The researcher did an extensive investigation of databases to obtain and retrieve the most relevant articles pertaining to mindfulness in relation to couples therapy in the mental health profession. The following databases were used to acquire articles: Academic Search Complete, Child Development & Adolescent Studies, CINHAL, ERIC, Family Studies World Wide, Google Scholar, Humanities with full text (H. S. Wilson) Health Source: Nursing Academic Edition, Mas Ultra-School Edition, EBSCO, Master File Premier, Medline with Full Text, PsychARTICLES, Psychological Behavior Science Collection, Religion and Philosophy, Women’s Studies International, Family Studies Abstract, Family Studies and Society Worldwide, SocINDEX with full text. The researcher also used terms to help guide the process of procuring data relevant to the study, the following terms were used: mindful, mindfulness, mindfulness meditation, couples therapy, couples counseling, mindfulness interventions, and mindfulness application.

Sample

The researcher began the initial search for data on the topic of mindfulness by using the terms mindful and mindfulness without filters at the TWU Research Library. The search initiated 62,074 results. The researcher refined the search by using the subject guide and defined databases to the ones stated above; that search resulted in over 25,000 articles. The researcher then turned to NIH PubMed library where again the researcher did a search without filters using the two terms mindful and mindfulness. This search generated over 4891 results. The researcher redefined the filters to include only peer-reviewed articles in specified databases from 2000—2017 this resulted in over 15,000 results being generated. The researcher continued to redefine the searches of both NIH PubMed Library and the TWU Research Library by adding filters to begin the process of finding peer-reviewed journal articles pertaining to the topic of mindfulness in couples therapy.

The researcher redefined the search and gathered articles from peer-reviewed journals; all identified journal issues from 2000—2017 were included in the collection. Only articles that had terms related to the study were included as part of the data collection. The following terms guided the research in determining the inclusion for this study: mindful, mindfulness, meditation, family therapy, counseling, couples therapy, group therapy, mindfulness mediation, and couples counseling.

Articles that did not meet the ascribed criteria were excluded from this study. This researcher excluded book reviews, commentaries, honorariums, introductions, forwards, and responses. This study originally had 15 articles that met the ascribed

criteria. During the analysis process the primary researcher found an anomaly in two of the 15 peer-viewed journal articles. Therefore, Carson, Carson, Gil, and Baucom (2004) and Carson, Carson, Gil and Baucom (2007) were deleted from the study. The final sample of 13 peer-reviewed journal articles are in Table 1 below.

Table 1

Sample: Author(s), Title and Journal Publication

1. Barnes, Brown, Campbell, Rogge, (2007)	The role of mindfulness in relationship satisfaction and responses to stress.	<i>Journal of Marital and Family Therapy</i>
2. Beckman & Sarracco, (2011)	Enhancing emotionally focused couple therapy: A case study.	<i>Journal of Family Psychology</i>
3. Burpee & Langer, (2005)	Mindfulness and marital satisfaction.	<i>Journal of Adult Development</i>
4. Gillespie, Davey, & Flemke, (2015)	Intimate partners perspective on the relational effects of mindfulness-based stress reduction.	<i>Contemporary Family Therapy</i>
5. Krafft, Haeger, & Levin, (2017)	The interaction of mindful awareness and acceptance in couples satisfaction.	<i>Personality and Individual differences</i>
6. Laurent, Hertz, Nelson, Laurent, (2016)	Mindfulness during romantic conflict moderates the impact of negative partner behavior on cortisol responses.	<i>Hormones and Behavior</i>
7. McCarthy & Wald, (2013)	Mindfulness and good enough sex.	<i>Sexual and Relationship Therapy</i>
8. McCreary & Alderson, (2013)	The perceived effects of practicing meditation on women's sexual and relational lives.	<i>Sexual and Relationship Therapy</i>
9. Nanda (2013)	Mindful relationships.	<i>Sexual and Relationship Therapy</i>
10. Pruitt & McCollum, (2010)	Voices of experienced meditators: The impact of mediation practice on intimate relationships.	<i>Contemporary Family Therapy</i>
12. Siegel (2014)	The mindful couple	<i>Clinical Social Work Journal</i>
13. Wachs & Cordova, (2007)	Mindful relating: Exploring mindfulness and emotion repertoires in intimate relationships.	<i>Journal of Marital and Family Therapy</i>

Trustworthiness and Creditability

Every effort was given in this study to ensure credibility and trustworthiness. It is a given that the goal of credibility and trustworthiness are of the utmost importance, yet it seems even the scholars cannot agree on what it is or how exactly to achieve credibility and trustworthiness. For every genre of qualitative study, there is a corresponding set of criteria (Cho & Trent, 2006). Krippendorff (2013) stated that validity and reliability in the context of content analysis is scrutinized due to the nature of content analysis research design. Krippendorff (2013) further suggested that data in content analysis is susceptible to contamination and misinterpretation due to bias of the researcher, whether inadvertently or purposefully. According to Cho and Lee (2014) if the data can be replicated independent of the researcher, the data can then be deemed reliable.

Triangulation is one way to achieve credibility and trustworthiness; therefore, this researcher has chosen to use triangulation in both collecting and coding the data. The researcher utilized analyst triangulation in which two independent coders were enlisted to work with the researcher in the coding of the data (Patton, 1999). Each of the independent coders were well versed in qualitative and quantitative research analysis as one is a full professor at Texas Woman's University and the other is a recent graduate of the Family Therapy Doctoral program and is an adjunct professor at TWU and both have private practices. According to Babbie (2013) having multiple individuals involved in the coding process ensures data analysis is not skewed by the primary researcher.

Neuendorf (2017) suggested that using two or more methods within the same research design strengthens the trustworthiness and credibility in the results. Therefore,

during data collection, existing information was gleaned from the sample and then quantified during the analysis process. The data was quantified during the data analysis stage by looking at the frequency of occurrence of the themes, texts and phrases in the articles chosen for analysis as identified by either two or three coders; interrater reliability was established with Cohen's Kappa (Babbie, 2013).

Coding

According to Saldaña (2016), the basic premise of the word code or coding is the process between data collection and data analysis. Therefore, the researcher read and re-read the journal articles for content pertaining to mindfulness. Neuendorf (2017) stated that content analysis consists of both manifest content and latent content. The manifest content was first derived by reading and rereading each of the sample journal articles for content pertaining to mindfulness. The researcher then endeavored to extract the latent content within the sample research journal articles after attaining the manifest content in order to give more depth to the study. This entailed reading and rereading each article and interpreting words and phrases that pertained to mindfulness (Babbie, 2013). The researcher began the process of finding relevant texts, phrases, concepts and themes in the data to help create a coding form (Saldaña, 2016). Creating the coding form (Appendix A) and a coding guide (Appendix B) assisted the researcher in the analysis of the data in a concise and consistent manner (Neuendorf, 2017).

Coding Procedures

The researcher read, reread and analyzed all the articles collected based on the following two research questions: How is mindfulness intervention applied in couples

therapy studies in the mental health profession in relationship to empathy, well-being, emotional regulation and self-esteem? How have evidence-based research studies explored and expanded the understanding of mindfulness in evidence-based research journals specific to couples therapy in the mental health profession and in particular the examination of relationship satisfaction? The researcher categorized and recategorized until consistent patterns emerged from the data collected, thus allowing the researcher to progress to the next procedure of coding (Saldaña, 2016).

According to Cho and Lee (2014), open coding involves breaking down the data into the first level concepts, or in other words, defining them into master headings, second-level categories and subheadings. In this case, the first coding organized the data into first-degree categories such as “mindfulness and in couples therapy” then narrow it down to the second-degree categories like “mindfulness and relationship satisfaction” and finally refining the data treatment to categories like “mindfulness.” The second and the third categories emphasize identifying the themes existing between the concepts and themes relevant to the study (Saldaña, 2016). To improve credibility further the third coder identified finer details and affirmed the credibility of the information (Patton, 1999). Subsequently, all of the information was organized on a coding sheet to outline the categories, texts, phrases and themes.

The researcher met with both independent coders separately as their schedules did not permit a team meeting. The researcher met with the secondary coder initially to go over the results of four of articles. In the discussion of their individual findings they found inconsistency in what they had coded. Therefore, they both agreed that what would

be best was to have the researcher reread and develop a new coding form before starting the coding process in earnest. The researcher and third coder met once to go over the coding form. The researcher read and analyzed the entire sample of 13 peer-reviewed journal articles, the second coder read and analyzed 10 peer-reviewed articles and the third coder read and analyzed 5 peer-reviewed journal articles. Interrater reliability was established at the exceptional level of Cohen's Kappa (1.0--.81) after merging the results of the content analysis.

Summary

This chapter elaborated on the methodology used in the study to draw relevant findings or inferences with respect to the study objectives. Particularly, for this research, the content analysis method used to quantify the qualitative variables efficiently and cost-effectively (Neuendorf, 2017). The chapter also outlined the sample, described how journal databases helped in extracting relevant sources for analysis. Thus, it explains the criteria for inclusion including the depth of research, relevance, and accuracy. This chapter also discussed how coding procedures were implemented.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

A content analysis was conducted with the intent of understanding what had been written in scholarly journal articles across the mental health field from 2000-2017 about the application and usefulness of mindfulness in couples therapy. The researcher analyzed 13 peer-reviewed scholarly journal articles that met the criteria for inclusion in the content analysis. The results of the content analysis are discussed in this chapter.

Demographic Data

The demographic data collected is represented in Table 2 below in regard to relationship status, length of relationship, gender, ethnicity, age and education level. All of the 652 participants in this study were in a relationship, either, married, cohabiting, dating or engaged, there were no single participants represented in this study. The majority of this studies participants were Caucasian college students in a dating relationship.

Table 2

Demographic Data Reported in the Sample Journal Articles

Variables	Population
Relationship Status	
Married	264
Cohabiting	20

Dating	364
Engaged	4
Not Reported	0
Length of Relationship	
Span (Years)	1 - 15
Average	5.67
Gender	
Female	403
Male	249
Ethnicity	
Caucasian	428
Black	12
Hispanic/Latino	8
American Indian/Alaskan Native	9
Asian/American	8
Hawaii/Pacific Islander	1
Not Reported	186
Education Level	
Graduate (Master's)	33
College Graduate (Bachelor)	407
High School	10
Elementary	32

Themes

The researcher and coders extracted as much latent information as possible in order to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the content analysis research study. There were three major themes that emerged from this content analysis: positive change in relationship satisfaction, positive change in emotional reactivity, and positive change in acceptance and awareness.

Relationship Satisfaction

The theme positive change in relationship satisfaction was found in twelve out of the thirteen sample articles. The strength of this finding provides support that the application of mindfulness can positively impact couple therapy outcomes.

Shargh et al., (2016) conducted a randomized control study to determine if an 8-week mindfulness-based cognitive group therapy increased relationship satisfaction and overall well-being. Participants included 60 married women between the ages of 20-45 with infertility for at least one year. Pretest and post-test measures were taken using the Marital Satisfaction Questionnaire and General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-28). Researchers found a significant increase in marital satisfaction and general health and well-being in relation to mindfulness ($p < .05$).

Burpee and Langer (2005) rejected the null hypothesis that there was no significant difference between mindfulness and marital satisfaction. Participants in the study included 55 married females and 40 married males between the age 20 to 74. There were 95 participants answered a three-part questionnaire, 14 questions related to marital satisfaction and spousal similarity, the third part if the questionnaire was a mindfulness

scale. The alternate hypothesis was accepted for spousal similarity and marital satisfaction after conducting a regression analysis at 95% confidence level. The results indicated a significant relationship between mindfulness and marital satisfaction ($p < .01$).

Barnes, Brown, Campbell, and Rogge (2007) conducted two studies to determine the role of stress in romantic relationships and mindfulness in relationship satisfaction. The participants in the first study included 89 college students with average length of relationship of 18.6 months. The first study consisted of correlations of *Mindfulness Attention Awareness Scale* measured over time and relational satisfaction ($p < .05$), Dyadic Adjustment Scale and Investment Model Scale. The second study included 82 of the original 89 participants included in study one. The second study consisted of videotaping a conflict discussion and coding the discussion using the System of Coding Interactions in Dyads. The researcher found a significant relationship between mindfulness as it related to an increase in relationship satisfaction ($p < .0001$) and decreases in anxiety ($p < .05$), verbal aggression ($p < .001$), anger-hostility ($p < .01$), negativity and conflict ($p < .05$).

Wachs and Cordova (2007) investigated the relationship between mindfulness, empathy and marital quality. In this study, researchers used Mindful Attention Awareness Scale, Dyadic Adjustment Scale, Marital Satisfaction Inventory-Revised, Toronto Alexithymia Scale, The Interpersonal Reactivity Index and the subscales of the three domains that test for capacity for empathy, Perspective-Taking (PT), Empathic Concern (EC) and Personal Distress (PD). Researchers found a significant relationship between

mindfulness and marital satisfaction ($p < .05$), empathic concern ($p < .05$) perspective taking ($p < .01$), lack of person distress ($p < .05$), control of anger ($p < .01$) and impulsivity.

Two studies examined the effects of mediation and mindfulness on individuals and couples. McCreary and Alderson (2013) conducted a study aimed at understanding the perceived effects of mediation on women's sexual and relational lives. All seven of the participants in the study reported improved relationships with their partners, better sexual experiences with their partners, less stress in their daily lives, and a sense of wellbeing. Elsewhere, a case study presented by Siegal (2014) illustrated the positive effects mindfulness can have on volatile couples. Siegal (2014) found that by integrating mindfulness techniques into therapy, the couple was able to gain emotional regulation and move forward with therapy session goals. The author also found that mindfulness was pivotal in creating space for a positive outcome in therapy and in their marriage.

Nanda (2013) found that integrating mindfulness into existential therapy was key to helping clients continue moving forward in their marriage. Nanda (2013) implemented mindfulness techniques such as breathing and body scans to help the couple find a way to calm themselves. Mindfulness techniques were applied in session and assigned as homework to help the couple stay present and focus on the moment rather than past hurts and conflicts.

Emotional Reactivity

A positive change in emotional reactivity was found in 9 out of the 13 sample articles. This theme was supported by all seven qualitative research articles and one

quantitative research design article. The strength in this finding was that researchers found a positive change in emotional reactivity through the application of mindfulness in couples therapy. Thus, demonstrating the potential of mindfulness to positively influence couples therapy outcomes. The quantitative research gave more strength to this finding by linking mindfulness application and the biological implications of mindfulness outcomes.

Laurent, Hertz, Nelson, and Laurent (2016) hypothesized that mindfulness would moderate conflict in romantic relationships. The researcher tested cortisol levels of 88 dating couples by using their saliva samples. The cortisol levels of the participants were tested before, during, and then 15 and 30 minutes after the conflict discussion ended. The authors found that cortisol levels were lower in the couples that used mindfulness to discuss difficult issues in their relationship ($p < .0001$).

Siegel (2014) examined the application of mindfulness with a high conflict couple. Siegel (2014) found that mindfulness techniques such as mindfulness breathing exercise and body scans allowed the couple to calm down enough for therapy to continue. Siegel (2014) encouraged the couple to use mindfulness techniques as part of their daily lives. The author instructed the couple to stay focused and aware of the present moment, by being aware of their thoughts and focusing on the present moment the couple was able to stay out of their cycle of hostility and anger.

In another case study, Nanda (2013) examined how a couple on the brink of divorce was able to reshape their marriage by implementing mindfulness into their marriage. Nanda (2013) reported that integrating mindfulness as part of the therapy

session allowed the couple to relax and breathe through difficult interactions rather than being reactive to one another. The couple was able to identify and clarify the other's difficulties without judgement. Thus, giving them a sense of being cared for and heard.

McCarthy and Wald (2013) examined how mindfulness in conjunction with the concept of "Good Enough" sex could help alleviate intimate partner sexual issues.

McCarthy and Wald (2013) found that mindfulness techniques allowed the couple to become more aware of one another's sexual needs and accept their sexual differences without judgment. Thus, allowing the couple to enjoy one another without feeling the pressure of the perceived perfect outcome of orgasm.

In another qualitative research study, researchers examined the relational effects of mindfulness on partners that had participated in an 8-week MBSR training (Gillespie, Davey, & Flemke, 2015). The partners of the MBSR graduates were interviewed on their perception of their partners and their relationship. Gillespie et al. (2015) found that all 11 intimate partners stated that MBSR improved their relationship considerably in the area of emotional regulation. Pruitt and McCollum (2010) explored the effects of meditation traits in intimate relationships. The participants in this study had been meditating for at least 10 years; the researcher's sought to understand how meditation practices impacted their intimate relationships. All 10 participants reported that meditation practices positively impacted their intimate relationships by giving them more awareness and acceptance of themselves and their partners.

Acceptance and Awareness

The third theme that emerged from the content analysis was a positive change in awareness and acceptance. A total of eight articles found a positive change in acceptance and awareness, seven qualitative research articles found a positive change in awareness and one quantitative study found a positive change in acceptance and awareness. The strength in this finding is expressed in the seven qualitative articles which explicitly look at the application of mindfulness. This theme once again demonstrates the positive influence mindfulness has on couples therapy outcomes.

The quantitative research study conducted by Krafft, Haeger, & Leven (2017), using linear regression analysis, showed that the combined trait facet of mindfulness awareness and acceptance would be a better predictor of couples satisfaction than either of the mindfulness trait facets of awareness or acceptance alone. In the study, Krafft et al. (2017) found an increase in couples satisfaction with an increase in acceptance and awareness as predicted ($p < .0001$). When testing awareness and acceptance independently, Krafft et al. (2017) found that awareness was not a predictor of couple's satisfaction ($p = .53$) In isolation, acceptance was useful as a predictor of couples satisfaction ($p < .01$).

Summary

This chapter reviewed the results of the content analysis. Three major themes emerged: a positive change in relationship satisfaction, a positive change in emotional reactivity and a positive change in acceptance and awareness. The strength of these

findings were demonstrated in the number of times each article supported and were interrelated with one another in finding a positive change in relationship satisfaction. The themes found in the peer-reviewed journal articles give insight into how mindfulness is being applied and used in the mental health field in couple therapy.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

The impetus for this study was to discern how mindfulness was currently being applied and used in the mental health field in couples therapy. This chapter discussed the relevant findings, therapeutic implications, limitation and recommendations for future research of mindfulness in couples therapy. The effectiveness of mindfulness intervention is well documented in research studies with individuals suffering a variety of mental health issues including, anxiety, depression, chronic pain, and borderline personality disorder (Kabat-Zinn, 2011). There is an abundant research on the benefits, usefulness and application of mindfulness with the emphasis on individuals. The findings from this content analysis indicate that mindfulness has a positive effect on relationship satisfaction, has a positive effect emotional reactivity and has a positive effect on acceptance and awareness in couples therapy outcomes.

Mindfulness

Mindfulness is not just a tool or techniques, mindfulness is a way of being (Kabat-Zinn, 1990). An ongoing process that allows one to be present in their lives, observe their thoughts, pay attention to those thoughts without judgment and hold those thoughts in a space of kindness and compassion. The construct of mindfulness can be defined as “the awareness that arises through intentionally attending in an open, caring and discerning way” (Shapiro & Carlson, 2017, p. 10). In order for mindfulness to be

effective in therapy it is crucial for clinicians to practice mindfulness themselves understanding the underlying tenets of mindfulness is necessary in order to apply and teach clients how to practice mindfulness to improve their relational and personal lives (Crane et al., 2017).

Relationship Satisfaction

Researchers in the case studies in this content analysis observed how the application of mindfulness techniques were beneficial in their client's ability to continue working towards resolution of their issues with less emotional reactivity and that the key to a positive change in relationship satisfaction was due to a positive change in acceptance and awareness of each other as human beings with separate needs and desires (Beckerman & Sarracco, 2011; McCarty & Wald 2013; Nanda 2013; Siegel, 2014). Researchers also discovered that relationship satisfaction was linked to less emotional reactivity and a positive change in acceptance and awareness of themselves and their partners (Gillespie et al., 2015; McCreary & Alderson 2013; Pruitt & McCollum 2010).

A qualitative research study illustrated that intimate partners of MBSR graduates felt that mindfulness training had helped their partners learn to be more attentive and exhibited "...a subtle feeling of being accepted and the feeling of being recognized and seen" (Gillespie et al., 2015, p. 402). The authors also noted that the partners experienced improvements in their relationship although the impact was not seen as significant, "So it is much better. And it's, but, um, I don't know that it been as, as strong an effect as I was hoping" (p. 403).

The effectiveness of mindfulness as a technique in increasing relationship satisfaction was achieved by numerous avenues by the scientists reviewed in this study. Shargh et al. (2016) found that MBSR training positively impacted women's relationship satisfaction and well-being by teaching them mindfulness techniques to apply to their daily lives. The authors indicated that the reason why MBCT had an impact was because participants in the mindfulness treatment group learned ways of handling stress. MBCT strategies equipped the participants with new ways of handling life's daily life stressor.

Laurent, Hertz, Nelson and Laurent (2016) found that cortisol levels went down when participants used mindful dialogue to discuss a difficult relationship issue. Researchers using descriptive statistics analysis to measure mindfulness found a positive change in relationship satisfaction as result of measuring for trait facets of mindfulness (Barnes et al. (2007; Burpee & Langer 2005; Wachs & Cordova 2007). These findings further affirmed the findings in all of the qualitative studies as well Shargh et al. (2016) and Laurent, et al. (2016) the difference in these findings is that they are correlations of innate mindfulness traits verses application of mindfulness techniques, therefore they support the strength of the findings of this study, but on their own merit, as individual studies should be interpreted carefully as correlations, not cause and effect outcomes.

Emotional Reactivity

All of the case studies in this content analysis illustrated how mindfulness techniques applied in session can de-escalate high conflict couples so that therapy can continue to work towards bringing couples closer together to resolve and embrace their issues. Gillespie, et al. (2015) found that their partners were more attentive and exhibited

“...a subtle feeling of being accepted and the feeling of being recognized and seen” (p. 402.) “Mindfulness techniques can play an important role in downregulating states of high arousal” (Siegel 2014, p. 286). Implementing mindfulness allowed the couple to continue therapy sessions and work towards rebuilding their relationship with greater kindness, acceptance and awareness.

Scientists are just beginning to understand what parts of the brain are influenced by mindfulness. The implications of how mindfulness can foster emotional balance to clients lives continues to grow in the area of neural science (Way, et al., 2010). Therapist dealing with high conflict couples can find it difficult to engage the couple in resolving their current issues when the couple is in a state of high arousal. Couples in a high state of arousal are unable to access or understand their partners perspective because their prefrontal cortex has been” hijacked” by the amygdala (Farb et al., 2010). Therapists with high conflict couples often witness the lack of awareness and insight that couples have for one another. Therapists that practice mindfulness-based therapy are able to implement mindfulness techniques such as breathing to calm the amygdala thus allowing for a safe space for couples to engage in resolving their challenges (Siegel, 2014).

Nanda (2013) found integrating mindfulness practices with mindful dialogue was key to transforming a marriage on the brink of divorce to reconciliation. “Understanding is the essence of love. If you cannot understand this person, you cannot love properly”

Thich Nhat Hann, 2004, p. 2). Mindfulness "...offered them a deeper sense of being heard and understood by each other in kindness" (Nanda 2013, p. 129).

Researchers discovered that participants that practice mindfulness meditation were able to control their reactions and emotions more effectively, giving them a greater sense of well-being, "I get anxious and then I take it on him....it has impacted our relationship in that it brings my stress level down. It allows me to be kinder to him and supportive of him" (McCreary & Alderson, 2013, p.113). The author's findings were supported by four of six quantitative studies examined in this content analysis (Barnes, et al., 2007; Krafft et al., 2017; Laurent, et al., 2016; Wachs & Cordova, 2007).

Acceptance and Awareness

A positive change in acceptance and awareness was found in a majority of the sample articles in this study. For example, Krafft et al. (2017) found that acceptance and awareness were more predictive of relationship satisfaction together, but of the two, acceptance was the more important in predicting relationship satisfaction. The interesting finding in this study was that greater awareness moderated by low acceptance predicted a lower levels of relationship satisfaction. This finding illuminated the interaction of the facets of trait mindfulness allowing for therapist to address trait mindfulness facets separately or together depending on the couples relationship distress. This finding indicates that acceptance in some cases may facilitate a more beneficial outcome for high conflict couples.

Pruitt and McCollum (2010) noted that participants' meditation practices allowed them to be "less reactive to daily stress" (p. 143). The practice of meditation was credited

for a greater compassion and kindness towards themselves and their partners allowing for a deeper connection to their partners. McCreary and Alderson, (2013) discovered that mindfulness meditation encouraged more acceptance and awareness through appreciating and focusing on the best qualities of their partners, “I think it makes me feel less judgmental, so you can feel closer and more accepting” (p. 112). All seven of the qualitative studies affirmed that acceptance and awareness to be fundamental in creating a space for relationships to grow and deal with difficult issues.

Implications

The potential benefits of mindfulness on relationships have only recently begun to be explored. The results of this content analysis have multiple implications for researchers to add to the understanding and application of mindfulness in the mental health profession with emphasis on the benefits of mindfulness in regard to relationships.

Therapy Training

One of the most difficult things to teach beginning therapists is to be present with their clients (Gehart & McCollum, 2010). Shapiro and Carlson (2017) stated that the practice of mindfulness can help trainees’ with being attentive and present in therapy, to be more compassionate and attuned to their clients and to help them maintain and improve their own emotional balance. Building a therapeutic alliance with clients is an essential part of successful therapy outcomes, training novice therapists mindfulness gives them the skills necessary to make the connection to their clients with open hearts and minds (Gehart & McCollum, 2010).

Evidenced-based research has indicated that implementing mindfulness as part of training in the mental health profession has the potential to improve the development skills of new therapists (Davis & Hayes, 2011). Building a therapeutic alliance with clients is an essential part of successful therapy outcomes training novice clients in mindfulness could be one way to help novice become more present. Since the practice of mindfulness includes being aware of one's thoughts, paying attention to those thoughts with kindness and compassion, and without judgment, these skills are the very skills that are necessary to build strong therapeutic alliances (Kabat-Zinn, 2011). Mindful therapists are able to create therapeutic alliance with authenticity, warmth and compassion by the very nature of practicing mindfulness, as a way of being. Those clinicians that practice mindfulness as a personal practice become by default mindful therapists.

Couples Therapy

The results of this content analysis revealed that not only is there evidence that mindfulness positively influences relationship satisfaction, but that there is a current deficit in the number of evidenced-based research studies currently being conducted on the relational aspects of mindfulness. In order for mindfulness to be effective in therapy, clinicians need to practice mindfulness themselves, understanding the underlying tenets of mindfulness is necessary in order to apply and teach clients how to practice mindfulness to improve their relational and personal lives (Shapiro & Carlson, 2017).

Emotional Regulation

Evidence-based research with the use of MRI's are able to see how the brain reacts to stress pre and post mindfulness-based stress reduction training, MRI images show that

amygdala is less reactive with MBSR training. Scientists have also discovered that the cortisol lining thickens in the brain with MBSR training, this thickening in the midline cortisol lining leads to a reduction in depression (Farb et al. 2010). Therapists that practice mindfulness-based therapy are able to implement mindfulness techniques such as breathing to calm the amygdala thus allowing for a safe space for couples to engage in resolving their challenges (Siegel, 2014).

Future Research

Evidenced-Based Research

Mindfulness is relatively nascent to the field of mental health professionals particularly those involved in helping couples and families. Evidenced-based studies examining mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) and exploring how and what elements of mindfulness are responsible for significant clinical outcomes is an area worth investigation (Kabat-Zinn, 2011). Both scientific and clinical studies would be advantageous in expanding the knowledge of how MBIs contribute to mental health. The evidence-based research benefits have grown exponential in the last decade and, yet, there are still minimal evidenced-based research studies aimed at couples and families as exhibited in Table 3 and Table 4 below. The data below clearly shows and identifies a growing interest in the scientific community by the number of identified peer-reviewed journal articles represented in these two tables. These two tables also define that gap in the number of peer-reviewed journal articles with the focus on mindfulness in relation to couples and families.

Table 3

Mindfulness Articles Identified by National Institutes of Health, 2000-2017

No. of Mindfulness Articles Published from 2000 – 2017				
	2000 - 2007	2008-2012	2013 - 2017	Totals
Mindfulness	269	1,099	3,590	4,849
Family Therapy	7	34	97	138
Couples Therapy	2	2	8	12
<i>Source: National Institutes of Health, US National Library of Medicine (PubMed)</i>				

Table 4

Mindfulness Articles Identified by TWU Library, 2000-2017

No. of Mindfulness Articles Published from 2000 – 2017				
	2000 - 2007	2008-2012	2013 - 2017	Totals
Mindfulness	816	3808	8823	13,807
Family Therapy	11	17	43	71
Couples Therapy	1	6	11	18
<i>Source: Texas Woman’s University Research Library</i>				

Training. Research in the area of developing core clinical skills through mindfulness and patient outcomes related to clinicians trained in mindfulness (Gehart & McCollum, 2010). Shapiro and Carlson (2017) suggest that examining the second order change of patient outcomes in order to determine what mechanisms effected the change, “Through what pathways does mindfulness enhance clinical ability and patient outcome?” (p. 143). These questions could be answered through additional research in

different forms of mindfulness training to see what was the most effective in developing core competency clinical skills (Gehart & McCollum 2007; Shapiro & Carlson, 2017).

Neuroscience. Neuroscience is on the leading edge of understanding what parts of the brain are influenced by mindfulness interventions. Continued exploration in the field neuroscience is full of promise in understanding of how mindfulness effects emotional regulation, memory, depression and anxiety (Farb et al., 2010). Neuroscience research designed to understand the regions and neural pathways of the brain could be an exceptional way of identifying and clarifying the mechanisms of mindfulness processes of change.

Definition. Another area for future researchers to consider is how to define mindfulness in order to operationalize mindfulness it must first be defined. Defining mindfulness will be a monumental task that may or may not be achieved. Defining something that is not only a process, but an awareness is fraught with challenges but a challenge that requires both scientific and clinical researchers to address (Shapiro & Carlson, 2017).

Limitations

This content analysis specifically sought to understand how mindfulness was applied and used in couples therapy thereby eliminating all other relational aspects of mindfulness. Therefore, the information ascertained from this study cannot be applied to family therapy or medical family therapy although the findings may be useful to consider. Another limitation was the limited amount of research articles available that examined or

explored mindfulness. Only 18 articles were written from 2000—2017; prior to that date there were no articles that examined mindfulness in couples therapy.

Another limitation in terms of mindfulness was the way mindfulness was investigated as an application of a tool or technique and not as a way of being. Inadvertently by looking at the application of mindfulness rather than a process may have limited the findings of understanding the usefulness of mindfulness as a way of being. The topic of mindfulness is not easily investigated since it is neither a tool or technique, it is a way of being.

Conclusion

Since mindfulness is based on Buddhist principles, it is neither technique or tool, it is a way of being (Kabat-Zinn, 1990). Mindfulness is both simple and complex. For example, mindful awareness in its simplest form is the awareness of breathing. The complexity comes in the fundamental aspect of being aware of ones mind at all times, understanding that ones feelings, thoughts and emotions are fleeting from moment to moment (Shapiro & Carlson, 2017). The mindfulness scholar Nyanaponika Thera wrote:

Mindfulness then is the unfailing master key for *knowing* the mind, and is thus the starting point: the perfect tool for *shaping* the mind, and is thus the focal point: and the lofty manifestation of the achieved freedom of the mind: and is thus the culminating point (as cited in J. Kabat-Zinn, 2005, p. 108).

In order to experience the freedom of mindfulness, it must be systematically cultivated through both formal and informal practice (Kabat-Zinn, 2011). Mindfulness as a practice

invites one to go beyond living for tomorrow and instead beckons you to live your life now in the moment with wisdom, kindness, and compassion for yourself and others.

The purpose in conducting this content analysis was to understand how mindfulness was being applied and used in the mental health profession in couples therapy. The research questions that guided this study were, “How is mindfulness intervention applied in couples therapy studies in the mental health profession in relationship to empathy, wellbeing, emotional regulation and self-esteem? “How have evidence-based research studies explored and expanded the understanding of mindfulness in evidence-based research journals specific to couples therapy in the mental health profession and in particular the examination of relationship satisfaction?”

There was significant evidence that mindfulness interventions applied in couples therapy may support a positive change in relationship satisfaction. The researcher concluded that these findings were significant given that 12 out of the 13 articles examined in this study found a positive change in relationship satisfaction. The researcher also found significant evidence that mindfulness has a positive change in emotional reactivity and acceptance and awareness. The researcher concluded that these findings were significant with a majority of the articles examined in the study finding a positive change in acceptance and awareness, and emotional reactivity.

The second research question that guided this study “How have researchers explored and expanded the usefulness of mindfulness in evidenced based research journals specific to couple therapy in the mental health profession with particular examination on relationship satisfaction?” The research concluded that additional

empirical evidenced-based research aimed at the mechanisms of mindfulness and the potential positive impact it can have on couples therapy outcomes in the mental health field. The research concluded this on the basis of the extensive database search that was done that generated 18 articles specifically focused on the topic of mindfulness. Researchers in several articles called for more empirically based research to commence specifically focused on couples and families (Crane et al., 2017; Davis & Hayes, 2011; Gambrel & Keeling, 2010; Gehart & McCollum, 2007; Kabat-Zinn, 2011; Shapiro & Carlson, 2017). This research is needed in order to gain knowledge and understanding of the process of change that mindfulness may have on couple therapy outcomes.

Finally, the researcher concluded that mindfulness can be a difficult topic to discuss theoretically and academically because of the nature of mindfulness itself. Mindfulness is not just a tool or technique, it is a way of being. Blending the ancient philosophies of the East into the Western world of modern science is indeed encircled with challenges; and yet the possibilities of bringing these two epistemologies together creates enormous potential and opportunities to diminish the suffering of clients in the mental health field.

Summary

Mindfulness is a relatively new concept in the mental health field in regard to interpersonal relational outcomes. Therefore, the resources mental health professionals have access to is minimal. The phenomenal opportunities to expand and explore the vast potential mindfulness may have on couples therapy outcomes were discussed in this chapter.

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APPENDIX A

Coding Form

Mindfulness Tools	Intervention/Application	Methodology	Measures	Hypothesis:
Increased self-awareness	Increase overall wellbeing	Increase empathy for self and others	Increase emotional regulation	
Increase in Relationship Satisfaction	Increase positive communication	Increase ability to stay present (not in the future or in the past, present in the moment)	Decrease emotional reactivity in relationships	Decrease Anxiety

APPENDIX B

MINDFULNESS CODING GUIDE

1. Methodology: Quantitative (Qt), Qualitative (Ql), Mixed Methods (MX)
2. Mindfulness Intervention: List type of Mindfulness used MBSR MBCT
3. Mindfulness Tools and Techniques: List type of tool or techniques (Example, sitting mediation)
4. Measures: Tests used; acronyms only (Example, DAS MAAS, QMI)
5. Hypothesis: Ho or Ha
6. Does Mindfulness increase, decrease or is there no change in couples relationship satisfaction?
7. Does mindfulness influence individuals/couples well-being?
8. Does mindfulness help couples decrease emotional reactivity?
9. Does mindfulness decrease emotional reactivity?
10. Does mindfulness increase empathy for self and others?
11. Therapy Implication: How can mindfulness tools, techniques and practice be most useful to couples therapy outcomes?

Research Questions:

1. Since 2000, how are mindfulness interventions and techniques applied in couples therapy in the mental health profession with relationship to understanding variables such as wellbeing, empathy, self-esteem, and emotional regulation.

2. How have researchers explored and expanded the usefulness of mindfulness in evidenced based research journals specific to couple's therapy in the mental health profession with particular examination on relationship satisfaction?

Notes: The above questions are guidelines to help coders identify the studies underlying purpose of understanding how mindfulness can be useful to couples therapy outcomes. Any other input that could be useful to the researcher in guiding this study is welcome!