

Let me give you an example of what I mean by skills and how learning skills might be helpful in real life. One of the first things we'll do in therapy is to work together to understand your particular problem by looking at the interaction between your emotions, physical self, behaviors, thoughts, and environment.

1. Let's say you're an adult student and you've been "feeling" really anxious about taking tests at school. It's starting to create problems for you (e.g. trouble sleeping, missing classes and work, gaining weight, irritable with family members, excessive worrying, images of failing at work if you can't complete this course, thoughts and memories about never doing well on tests in high school).
 - a. What emotions are you feeling? What is your predominant mood? You're feeling anxious and irritable. Sometimes you feel depressed and worthless.
 - b. Where do you feel it in your body when you're anxious? Physically you might shake, or feel tension in your neck and shoulders, or have butterflies in your stomach. You're gaining weight (because you eat when you're anxious-add eating to the behavior category), which makes you mad (add mad to the emotion category). You probably have the urge to avoid, a common reaction when people are anxious.
 - c. What do you do when you're anxious? Behaviorally you are eating too much, avoiding going to class and work at times, and yelling more at your spouse and kids. You're also staying up late studying for the tests and not getting enough sleep, which is making you more vulnerable to negative moods (like being irritable and worried).
 - d. What kinds of thoughts do you have when you're anxious? What kinds of thoughts, memories, and/or images go through your mind? can't stop thinking about what will happen if you can't pass this course: You might lose your job...Then how will you support your family?...Who else would hire a dummy like you?...Your kids will starve!...You start to catastrophize, blowing things way out of proportion. Your thoughts and images become more and more irrational, but you can't stop them. Anxiety increases, physical symptoms increase, avoidance and other negative behaviors increase.
 - e. How do others react when you're anxious? Here we're talking about the people in your environment. Whether we like it or not, what we do impacts the people in our lives: The kids are upset...your co-workers are wondering what your problem is...your spouse is starting to get annoyed...even the dog notices and is giving you a wide berth.

And around and around it goes

2. The next step is to do some education about the interaction between these 5 parts. Can you see in the example how each part affects all of the other parts? The thing is, if nothing changes, your anxiety just gets worse. But if you change any one of these parts (i.e. environment, your thinking your behavior, or what you are doing physically), then your anxiety will start to change too. We can choose to work in any one of the areas, assuming reducing anxiety is your goal.
 3. Most people find that working on changing the physical symptoms of anxiety is most helpful, at least in the short term. So, we might work on ways to do this, such as relaxation breathing.
 4. OR, we might choose to work on identifying and changing the types of thoughts that start and/or exacerbate anxiety symptoms.
 5. OR, we might choose to work in changing behaviors that increase your anxiety.
 6. The neat thing is, there are lots of skills you can learn (or re-learn or transfer) that can help decrease or eliminate your anxiety.
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The skills we'll work on first are MINDFULNESS skills which form the foundation of all other skills sets. Mindfulness skills help you to increase your ability to pay attention, in the present moment, in a special way: that is, without judging whatever is happening as good or bad, or right or wrong. When you can do this, you gain objectivity. And when you are objective, you have the chance to gain (or re-gain) control, use a skill, and manage whatever needs managing (e.g. a situation, emotion, urge, etc) in an effective way. With these skills, and lots of practice, you can manage even the most difficult of emotions, tolerate even the most trying circumstances, and behave effectively within the most challenging interpersonal situations.

Now let's apply the skill of MINDFULNESS to the example we used above:

1. If you were being mindful, you would notice almost immediately that your symptoms of anxiety were starting. This is significant because the earlier you catch them, the less time they have to develop and increase in strength. The less powerful they are, the easier they are to manage. However, mindfulness can be effective no matter when you become aware of the symptoms or how severe they become.
2. If you were being mindful, you would first observe that the symptoms were there. Then, you would put words on your experience. For example, you might say to yourself: "Oh, I notice I'm having the feeling of being anxious."

3. If you were being mindful, you would notice any thoughts you might be having about your anxiety symptoms. For example, you would notice if you were having thoughts like: “Oh I can’t believe I’m shaking like this...I’m such a loser! I’ll never get through this test!...I’m such an idiot...I’ll never get this job...and so on and so on!”
4. If you were being mindful, you would just observe these “judgmental” thoughts. You would just let them pass on by. You wouldn’t ignore them or try to push them down. (Ever notice what happens when you try to push thoughts or emotions or urges away? They might go away for awhile, but don’t they always come back? And stronger than ever?) BUT you wouldn’t try to hold on to these thoughts for dear life either, that is, you would recognize them as “just thoughts” and not necessarily “the truth.” This helps you to develop the skill of being non-judgmental.
5. If you were being mindful, you would notice if your thoughts were future- oriented. You would work on staying in-the-moment and observing and describing your thoughts/emotions/urges as they were happening.
6. If you were being mindful—observing and describing your symptoms, in the present moment, in a non-judgmental way--you would be able to choose a skill that would help you manage your symptoms in an effective way.
7. Compare this to the anxiety scenario above. Can you see how the mindfulness skills fit? Often, mindfulness skills are the only skills a person needs to manage a thought, urge, or emotion effectively.

You read above that I teach mindfulness to all of my clients. You may have some questions about this. Here are some commonly asked questions.

- How can learning and using mindfulness skills help me with relationship problems?
- How can learning and using mindfulness skills help me with family problems?
- How can learning and using mindfulness skills help me at work?
- How can learning and using mindfulness skills help me with anger management?
- How can learning and using mindfulness skills help me sleep better or manage stress?
- How can learning and using mindfulness skills help me with over-eating, under-eating, body image, or an eating disorder?
- How can learning and using mindfulness skills help me to avoid destructive behaviors?

- How can learning and using mindfulness skills help me avoid relapse to an addictive behavior?
- How can learning and using mindfulness skills help me be a better parent or partner or spouse or friend?
- How can learning and using mindfulness skills help me with depression or anxiety?
- How can learning and using mindfulness skills help me to cope with illness or chronic pain?
- How can learning and using mindfulness skills help me to deal with grief over a loss (death, loss of job, divorce, etc.)

The answer to all of these questions (and more!) stems from this: **MINDFULNESS GIVES YOU POWER.** When you can observe and describe, in a non-judgmental way, what is happening (in your mind, body, and surroundings) at any given moment, you gain the power to act (even react) effectively.