



*The  
Mindful Court*  
MEDITATION FOR  
SUBSTANCE ABUSERS

BY JAMEY H. HUESTON

**M**editation practice for offenders convicted of drug and related offenses was offered by the Baltimore City Drug Treatment Court approximately 15 years ago, before it reached the mainstream popularity it enjoys today. Baltimore's drug court, one of the first in the nation, offered innovative, health-centered approaches to address the revolving door of repeat drug-related criminal prosecutions. Meditation was one of the creative innovations instituted by the program.

Today, scientific research supports the meditation strategy that the drug court began years ago based on intuition that meditation helps drug abusers to decrease their usage and reduce relapse. Mindfulness meditation is still promoted in drug court and has, in fact, expanded to the traditional courtroom. It is being used to help drug court offenders reduce their cravings, as well as in other court settings to help litigants who are struggling with a variety of issues, including anger, lack of self-control, and anxiety.

### **Meditation**

Meditation has its origins in eastern contemplative and Buddhist traditions of India, China, and Tibet and has been practiced throughout the world for thousands of years. It has steadily gained sizable popularity in the United States—the National Institutes of Health estimated that approximately 20 million people used meditation in 2007 compared with 15 million people in 2002. Major corporations, including Apple, Prentice Hall, Google, Nike, Yahoo, Deutsche Bank, and Aetna, are embracing meditation to promote stress reduction and employee well-being. Meditation has also become established in a variety of educational settings including law schools, medical schools, and public school systems to help students self-regulate, achieve calm, and manage deep-seated trauma, and to increase students' awareness of their internal and external environments. Training has also been offered for lawyers and judges.

Mindfulness meditation is the art of being unconditionally present in the moment, to free the mind from constant inner talk. The source of this inner talk is often anxiety, shame, a negative quality of life, and an inability to accept one's "self" as a worthy individual. Meditation trains the mind to gently focus on "now" and to achieve calm and control. As stray thoughts and cravings for reward are ignored, a level of serenity is achieved—a state that only comes with practice.

Mindfulness-based techniques are composed of several key components, including relaxation, body-mind

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awareness, focused attention through a word or mantra or an object such as a candle or breath, and an accepting attitude to the process. Meditators sit on the floor or a chair, straight- or cross-legged, with eyes open, closed, or gazing softly. Other meditation styles are performed in a variety of forms and methods, including religious, secular, walking, nature, chanting, or focusing one's attention. Whatever the form, position, location, or method chosen, positive benefits can be gained from meditation.

Research indicates that meditation and other mindfulness practices have substantial medical benefits and can improve various psychological and physical health problems, such as anxiety; high blood pressure; pain; depression; stress; insomnia; smoking; physical or emotional symptoms that may be associated with chronic illnesses, e.g., heart disease, HIV/AIDS, and cancer; borderline personality disorders; migraines; subjective experience of pain; and PTSD. Additionally, a recent study demonstrated that mindfulness-based relapse prevention reported significantly lower risk of relapse to substance use and heavy drinking compared to standard treatment options. (Sarah Bowen et al., *Relative Efficacy of Mindfulness-Based Relapse Prevention, Standard Relapse Prevention, and Treatment as Usual for Substance Use Disorders: A Randomized Clinical Trial*, 71 JAMA PSYCHIATRY 547 (2014).)

One need not practice meditation for years to achieve benefits. Meditating daily for just 30 minutes over eight weeks is "associated with changes in gray matter concentration in brain regions involved in learning and memory processes, emotion regulation, self-referential processing, and perspective taking." The results demonstrate the brain's "plasticity," or ability to change shape over time. (Britta K. Hölzel et al., *Mindfulness Practice Leads to Increases in Regional Brain Gray Matter Density*, 191 PSYCHIATRY RES.: NEUROIMAGING 36 (2011).)

### **Baltimore City Drug Treatment Court**

William besieged the drug court judge, "I lost everything to drugs: my apartment, health, car, job, family, and my self-esteem. Judge, I need help." Abusing heroin for over 20 years, William cannot stop his daily ingestion of the poison that has thoroughly saturated his system. His daily habit exceeds \$150. His criminal record is extensive and replete with drug possession, shoplifting, and other drug-driven convictions.

William, typical of the Baltimore City Drug Treatment Court population, is a microcosm of the larger city community that faces significant social challenges: single-parent families, widespread teenage pregnancy, generational drug usage, drug and crime-ridden neighborhoods, low educational achievement and underemployment, prolific domestic and street violence, and lead paint poisoning to name a few. Offenders commonly enter drug court suffering from a combination of drug withdrawal, poor nutrition, little education, unemployment, few life goals, hopelessness, and low self-esteem. Untreated mental health, trauma, and physical issues also are routinely present. William, like so many drug court participants, lacks

skills to remain drug free and to pursue a responsible lifestyle after many years of serious drug usage. He is physically, mentally, and spiritually depleted.

Treatment will help William develop greater awareness regarding the physical, psychological, and emotional effects of his addiction, drug usage triggers, and vulnerabilities and to address his obstacles—over time. Drug court will assist William in locating appropriate supportive housing, entering job training and life skills programs, and obtaining employment, education, and other services to address problems that contribute to his drug addiction. Together, treatment combined with the enhanced judicial supervision and services routinely offered by drug courts yield significantly better results. But program assistance will be ineffective if William cannot process the information and instructions he receives due to a drug-induced mental blur, or because he is unable to concentrate on treatment while preoccupied about feeding and clothing children, where to

euphoric results that are often immediate, powerful, and of a longer duration than those produced by natural rewards. The urge to repeat drug usage becomes strongly reinforced. Over time, neural pathways in the brain become altered and produce less dopamine, which decreases its impact on the reward system and the resulting pleasurable effects. The development of tolerance often leads drug abusers to become depressed and to increase the quantity of drugs as the dopamine receptors scream for attention to “score the high.” Dopamine also regulates body movements, motivation, and emotions that are impacted by prolonged drug abuse as the brain’s circuitry deteriorates. While under the influence of heroin, addicts for example will frequently “nod out” and have difficulty staying focused. They will literally sway as they stand before the court fighting to keep their eyes open and to remain erect. When “coming down” from a “drug high,” addicts become fidgety, anxious, physically uncomfortable, and eventually

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sleep, or even simple survival. No amount of available assistance will succeed if William is unable to focus or, worse yet, does not attend the programming or receive the services because of an uncontrollable drug addiction.

The Baltimore City Drug Treatment Court, like most drug courts nationwide, provides therapy instead of threats, praise instead of punishment, and insists upon honesty and communication. All participants entering the Baltimore program are told that there is no shame in seeking help. The program constantly reinforces that punishment is reserved for those who give up on their recovery and abscond from supervision—a dramatic difference between drug court and traditional court. However, addicts struggle moment by moment with an overwhelming compulsion to use drugs. “We call it the monkey on our back,” stated drug court participant Derrick, to justify why he did not ask the drug court team for help. He explained that soon after being released from jail upon entering the drug court, he retreated to the streets and resorted to his familiar drug behaviors, people, places, and things. He began using again and quickly put his present cravings in front of his long-term recovery. He was certain that his drug behavior would earn him a one-way trip to jail and absconded from the program.

### **Effect of Drugs on the Brain**

Drugs of abuse overstimulate the brain by inundating it with dopamine, a neurotransmitter that directly influences the reward center. The flood of dopamine produces

ill as the drugs evacuate their systems. Cravings and preoccupation with the “next fix” overpower their thoughts and actions even after years of abstinence. They have difficulty exerting self-control and recognizing the future consequences of their conduct.

Drug court teams are trained in the pharmacological and behavior effects of drugs upon the person and understand that drug addiction is a chronic, relapsing disease. However, it is difficult to convince habitual drug users who have had substantial contact with the criminal justice system that the court will respond with encouragement, not detention, for drug use, especially in the beginning stages of the program, if they are honest about their struggle and are actively engaged in treatment. It is difficult to persuade these frequent flyers that the judge and the drug court team understand that relapse can happen, for recovery is a process. Piercing the entrenched offender’s impression that the court system is bent on punishment for every infraction, especially drug usage, takes time and constant reinforcement, and drug courts are challenged to employ creative methods to maintain reluctant participants in the program.

Meditation was discovered to be a creative and effective alternative strategy to help participants continue during the early stages of the program, sustain them through the arduous program regime, and maintain their recovery after its completion. Research is supplying promising evidence that meditation changes the brain in a manner that helps to improve concentration, alertness, maintain a healthy lifestyle, and reduce relapse.

One size does not fit all, and different recovery strategies must be available to accommodate varying learning styles, capacities, and experiences. Carpenters who carry only hammers believe that everything looks like a nail, and drug court practitioners recognize that offenders feel abused by the criminal justice system and distrust offers of help. The challenge is to provide an array of tools and techniques to help participants to listen to instructions, calm their cravings, focus on treatment, and improve their lives. Meditation is one of these tools that aids participants in achieving calmness so they can focus on recovery.

### Baltimore Drug Court Meditation History

Baltimore City Drug Treatment Court's meditation program started with the guidance of Janet Cyford, a meditation specialist living in Baltimore. She visited transitional, supportive housing facilities bimonthly, to guide seriously addicted drug court participants in achieving quiet, composure, and tranquility—at least for a short period of time. Where possible, the lights were dimmed and participants were instructed to close their eyes or to gaze softly in front of them, sit straight but comfortably, take several deep breaths, and begin to allow thoughts or impressions to enter their minds without judgment or expectation. Cyford began the sessions by instructing the group to imagine that they were in different scenes, including a field of flowers or lying in the grass with beautiful, billowy clouds floating gently by and the warm sun cascading on their skin. In her soft, gentle, British accent she told them that they felt calm, warm, peaceful, and accepting.

At a monthly drug court hearing, one participant shared that while riding the bus to the open-air drug market to buy drugs, he meditated as instructed and successfully quelled his drug urge. He spontaneously turned to face the courtroom audience waiting their turns before the judge and encouraged them to try meditating. "This is some serious business, and it really helps," he added.

Eventually, Cyford was invited to teach meditation at the Baltimore City Detention Center by LaMont Flanagan, the innovative and progressive commissioner of the city jail who established Addicts Changing Together—Substance Abuse Program (ACT-SAP), one of the first jail-based acupuncture/treatment programs in the country. Before class, Cyford was met at the jailhouse steps by a guard who escorted her through sterile and endless cold cinder block hallways and a set of locked gates. She was struck by the joyless and intimidating atmosphere of the jail but forged ahead, nervous but undeterred. The steel door to the windowless treatment room slammed tightly behind her as she entered and was met by stares from 20 men in the standard jail-issued orange jumpsuits. Some wore incredulous expressions of disgust toward the distinguished, gray-haired woman who presumed that she could teach life lessons to this hardened population, while others sported looks of weariness, anticipating yet another hour of boredom.

Cyford inquired if any of the men were familiar or had ever tried meditation. A few hesitantly raised their hands, and a small, thin, wiry inmate offered that he had meditated

### Mindfulness Meditation: 5 Steps

To be mindful is to be aware of your thoughts and actions in the present without judging yourself. Mindfulness meditation involves focusing your mind on the present. Research shows that mindfulness meditation improves mood, decreases stress, and boosts immune function.

**Location.** Find a quiet and comfortable place. Sit in a chair or on the floor with your head, neck, and back straight but not stiff.

**Method 1: Breath.** Pay attention to each breath. Breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth.

**Method 2: Gaze.** Gently direct your gaze between three to five feet in front of you. Keep your gaze soft.

**Thoughts.** First, try to put aside all thoughts of the past and the future. Stay in the present. Second, notice when your thoughts come and go. As thoughts enter your mind do not ignore or suppress them, but simply take note. Remain calm and use your breathing as an anchor. If you find yourself becoming carried away by your thoughts, observe where your mind goes, without judging, and gently return to your breathing. Remember, do not be hard on yourself or judgmental; it is natural.

**Closing.** As the time comes to a close, sit for a minute or two, becoming aware of where you are. Get up gradually.

several times. He explained it as trying to concentrate on not concentrating. Cyford described the mindfulness technique to them and instructed her class to close their eyes and picture a safe place or think about their breathing. She encouraged them to notice the thoughts that entered their minds, then release them and return to their focus.

When the 30-minute session was over, the participants shared their experiences, some very personal and emotional. A new participant stated that the class really helped to move thoughts of using drugs from his mind. Another shared his angst at never being present for his young son as he pursued his drug habit and stated, "I saw myself walking and playing with my son. I talked to him about my mistakes and I feel that maybe I reached him somehow."

Cyford taught meditation at the jail every other week, alternating between the men's and women's dorms. Over the weeks, the inmates began to share more freely and opened up in surprising frankness. They expressed a variety of concerns and emotions and confided in the group about feeling guilty about leaving their families to drugs and being scared to face the streets again. The overwhelming majority of these inmates looked forward to Cyford's visits, and the guards,

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