Stress and Physician/Patient Communication: The Evidence Behind Mindfulness for "Unintentional Inattention"

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Conflict of Interest Disclosure

I have no conflicts and nothing to disclose

Brief Overview

- Working Memory Capacity (WMC)
- Selective Attention
  - Orienting
  - Conflict Monitoring
- "Cold" and "Hot" cognitive demands
- Inattentional Blindness/Deafness
- Communication
- Mindfulness Practice
Individual differences in WMC

Working Memory Capacity (WMC)

WMC includes:

1. "Attentional processes to select information and appropriate behavioral responses"
2. "Memory-related processes to maintain information in an active, easily accessible form so that task-relevant information can be manipulated in the service of current goals"


Selective Attention

- Process of directing our awareness to relevant stimuli while ignoring irrelevant stimuli
- Selective attention allows us to tune "into" relevant stimuli and tune "out" irrelevant/insignificant stimuli in service of moment-to-moment goals/tasks
- Important in that there is a limit to how much information can be processed at a given time
Selective Attention

- Selective Attention is involved in:
  1. Orienting
  2. Conflict Monitoring

“Cold” and “Hot” Cognitive Demands

- Cold Cognitive Demands
  - Emotionally neutral, analytical; requires comprehending, inferring, thinking in reasoned and rational ways (MCAT questions; gathering data for a diagnosis)

- Hot Cognitive Demands
  - Mental content that is emotionally valenced or laden (excessive demands at work, dysfunctional organizational relationships, family crises, difficulties, chronic stressors)
Higher WMC is correlated with greater success dealing with “Cold” cognitive Demands

Individuals with lower WMC tend to have more emotionally intrusive thoughts, less success suppressing positive and negative emotions, difficulty with emotion suppression and reappraisal tasks (Brewin & Smart, 2005; Schmeichel, Vohs, & Demaree, 2008).

“WMC corresponds to an individual’s success at intentionally guiding behavior while overcoming cognitive or affective (cold or hot) challenges, distractions, and conditioned response tendencies” (Jha, Rogers, and Morrison, 2014, p. 348).

Cold” and “Hot” Cognitive Demands

“The inability … to recover any information from unattended sensory stimuli and is thought to be part of an important cognitive mechanism, namely that of focusing or ‘concentrating’ on a task to be performed.”

(Encyclopedia of Neuroscience, 2009, Editors: Marc D. Binder, Nobutaka Hirokawa, Uwe Windhorst)

Inattentional Blindness/Deafness

Mindfulness is NOT!

- Magic!
- A Panacea!
- A breathing exercise
- Clearing the Mind
- Escaping emotions
What is Mindfulness?

- Present Focused Awareness & Attention, and Remembering
  - Remembering involves developing the intention to be aware
  - Also includes:
    - Non-judgment
    - Acceptance
    - Kindness and friendliness (to a person, attitude, problem, etc.)
- Formal & Informal Practice(s)
  - It Is Purposely Attending to Whatever is Occurring in your field of Experience (Open Monitoring—OM) or to Something Specific (Focused Attention—FA)
  - Being Aware of Being Aware!
  - Tending to your Attention!
  - Intentional Remembering!

How is it Helpful?

- During the Workday
  - To start the day
  - Between Patients
  - When with Patients
  - During Breaks/Lunch
- When not at work
  - After waking/Before bed
  - In relationships (to self, other, problem(s), issue(s), etc.)
  - When eating
  - Exercising
  - Doing anything!

When to Practice
"You cannot not communicate. Every behavior is a kind of communication. Because behavior does not have a counterpart (there is no anti-behavior), it is not possible not to communicate."

(Paul Watzlawick, Psychologist)

Physician/Patient Relationship

"It is difficult to imagine how any behavior in the presence of another person can avoid being a communication of one’s own view of the nature of one’s relationship with that person and how it can fail to influence that person."

(Paul Watzlawick, Psychologist)

Physician/Patient Relationship: Mindful Presence vs. Distracted Absence

Time for more Practice!
References

WMC & Attention

Research

Inattentional Blindness/Deafness

Research
Mindfulness and Medical Practice


