

## **Mindfulness-based therapy for women with binge eating problems**

It is not uncommon for women to experience difficulty controlling their eating at some stage in their lives. Even though food is part of a healthy lifestyle, it is plentiful and we are constantly bombarded with mixed messages about what we are supposed to eat. With stress and other factors, it can be very easy for eating to get out of hand, and this may lead to serious psychological and health problems. If you are hoping to get some help in addressing your eating concerns, you may wish to consider a mindfulness-based approach. Mindfulness can be defined as “the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment to moment”<sup>1</sup>. It is taught through regular meditation practice and other activities.

### **How do I know if I have a binge eating problem?**

Below is a list of some of the things that may be experienced by a person with a binge eating problem. If some or all of these things sound familiar, it may be worth getting some help:

- pre-occupied with thoughts about food and weight most of the time
- feeling disgusted with yourself, guilty, or depressed after overeating
- low self-esteem and poor body image
- feeling out of control, dieting or restricting food intake
- eating in response to stress or other emotions
- not being able to do the things you would like to do because of eating problems
- doing things to compensate for overeating, such as vomiting
- eating alone or hiding food from others

There are several ways that binge eating problems can be addressed. Some people find it helpful to see a GP or dietician, or perhaps try a self-help program. Others may benefit from attending a support group or a group therapy program, while some may prefer to work individually with a psychologist or therapist.

### **What does the therapy involve?**

Working individually with a therapist, over about 12-18 weekly sessions, to help you gain more control over your eating and develop a moderate eating pattern. The therapy program is aimed at taking a psychological, rather than a dietary approach, to addressing your eating concerns. The therapy aims to address your eating concerns in three main ways, depending on your individual needs and goals:

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<sup>1</sup> Kabat-Zinn, J. (2003). Mindfulness-based interventions in context: Past, present, and future. *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice*, 10(2), 144-156.

- Mindfulness – to develop self-awareness, acceptance, and a way of attending to things in the present moment, with the aim of helping you to be less vulnerable to falling back into habitual patterns
- Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy – to directly address the problematic behaviours in your life, and the thoughts, beliefs and attitudes associated with them
- Interpersonal Psychotherapy – addressing interpersonal issues that may be contributing to your eating problems

The therapy has been adapted from the Mindful Moderate Eating Group (Mindful MEG) program, a 12-week group program which has been effective in helping women gain more control over their eating behaviours and develop a moderate eating pattern.

As part of the therapy, you will be asked to try some tasks in between sessions, such as meditation and food-monitoring. The tasks may take around 30 minutes per day. We understand it is a large time commitment, but it is very important that you give them a try. Experience from the group program has shown us that those who attempt more work outside the sessions tend to gain more benefit.

The therapy also includes booster sessions 3-months and 6-months later, as a way of providing ongoing support and a chance to address any difficulties that may have arisen. This can be helpful as often people continue to make changes after they conclude therapy, as they begin to reflect on what has been learned and integrate this into daily life.

### **More about Mindfulness**

Mindfulness meditation involves the cultivation of moment-to-moment awareness in which people learn to accurately label their inner experience while detaching from judging it.<sup>2</sup> It is based in Buddhist Philosophy, is at least 2,500 years old, and has begun to establish itself in a Western framework in recent years<sup>3</sup>. It is therefore not new, and has some close similarities with other therapeutic approaches that aim to increase self-awareness. By providing a more authentic way of approaching your experiences, mindfulness aims to help you to react to situations with more choice. It is also hoped that the long-term benefits include gentleness toward oneself, a better capacity to deal with depressed mood and anxiety, and the feeling of living a more fulfilling life.

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<sup>2</sup> Kabat-Zinn, J. (1994). *Wherever you go, there you are: Mindfulness meditation in everyday life*. New York: Hyperion.

<sup>3</sup> Germer, C.K., Siegel, R.D., Fulton, P.R. (Eds). (2005). *Mindfulness and Psychotherapy*. New York: The Guilford Press.

We think that Mindfulness is helpful for people who are trying to reduce binge eating because:

- dieting and binge eating often result in reduced awareness of hunger and fullness signals
- it is easy to fall into habitual patterns of thinking and act on 'autopilot'
- sometimes binge eating prevents both positive or negative emotions from being felt, and it can be hard to be oneself and lead an authentic life if basic emotions are going unnoticed
- when people judge themselves harshly, they can find it hard to accept themselves, which may result in feeling stuck and not being able to address difficulties

### **Is this therapy suited to me?**

You will be invited to come in for a one-hour interview to further discuss your concerns around eating, and together, discuss your options and determine whether this therapy is likely to be suited to you.

Generally, this particular type of therapy may be suitable if there is a:

- desire to address some of the psychological or emotional issues that may be related to your eating problems
- preference to work individually rather than in a group
- a degree of commitment and willingness to try something different

### **Where will the sessions be held?**

The sessions will be held at the Psychology Clinic at Swinburne University of Technology, Hawthorn Campus. The Clinic provides counselling, clinical services and psychological assessment to the general public. It is a low-cost service, with sessions conducted by post-graduate trainees who are studying higher degrees in psychology. Trainees are under the direct supervision of senior psychologists. The Clinic is open between 9am and 9pm Mondays to Fridays, and 9am to 1pm on Saturdays. Appointments must be made ahead of time through the receptionist (Ph: 9214 8653). Appointments typically last for 1 hour.

### **What are the costs?**

The cost of the mindfulness-based therapy program includes an assessment fee of \$25 plus a program fee of \$400. A workbook and mindfulness CDs are provided. If you are unable to pay the program fee in one lump sum, please contact the Project Officer 9214 5528 to discuss alternate arrangements, for example, it is possible to pay two instalments of \$200.

## Evaluation of therapy

We are very interested in learning how to best help people to address their binge eating problems. Your opinions and experiences are very valuable. You will therefore be invited to participate in the research project, alongside the therapy, although participation is voluntary. The project is being conducted by a doctoral psychology student under supervision. The purpose of the research project is to evaluate the effectiveness of this mindfulness-based therapy for individuals with a binge-eating problem. We are interested in how effective this type of therapy is in addressing your concerns, how well accepted it is by you, and what things seem to make a difference in facilitating any changes. The therapy will be evaluated using a multiple-case study design. This involves a rich account of how the therapy occurs over time, with several clients, as it is actually practised. It is hoped that this type of project will provide insight into aspects seem to work and what aspects do not, with the aim of enhancing the profession's understanding and helping to benefit people in the future.

Participation in this research project involves:

- completing a questionnaire booklet prior to, and after completing, therapy, and then at 3-months and 6-months later (approximately 1 hour duration). You will be asked to answer multiple-choice questions related to your personality, coping styles, self-awareness, emotions, attitudes and eating habits
- filling out food monitoring records regularly during the course of therapy
- completing brief ratings (1 minute) at the end of each session to indicate your level of satisfaction with each session
- you will also be invited to participate in an interview upon completion of therapy (conducted by an independent student researcher) to provide feedback

You may benefit by participating in the study as it may compliment the therapeutic process by providing self-insight and a chance to reflect on your experiences. It may also be meaningful to know that you are contributing to research by allowing your case to be presented and having your 'story' told.

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You are free to refuse to take part, or to withdraw from the study at any stage. **Your decision to not participate or to withdraw from the study will not compromise the therapeutic support you receive in any way.** With your permission, the therapy sessions and interviews will be recorded on DVD or another electronic device. Of course, the recordings will be kept confidential and may only be viewed by the researchers and clinical supervisors. Confidentiality is assured, which means your data, including DVDs, will be stored in locked filing cabinets. No identifying material will be included in the thesis or any publications or conference presentations. You will be provided with the opportunity to read a

summary of your case study before publication, to check that it is accurate, and confirm that you agree for it to be published without identification.

Please see attached consent forms: 1) Consent to undergo a psychological assessment; 2) Consent to be a client of the Clinic; and 3) Consent to participate in the research project. You do not need to fill these out in advance, however they are provided for your information.

If you have any questions about this study, please contact the researchers:

Rebecca Wickham on 0409 256 089 or [beckwix@hotmail.com](mailto:beckwix@hotmail.com)

Dr. Naomi Crafti on (03) 9214 5355 or [ncrafti@swin.edu.au](mailto:ncrafti@swin.edu.au)

If you have any concerns or complaints about the conduct of this research project, please contact:

Research Ethics Officer  
Office of Research and Graduate Studies  
Swinburne University of Technology  
PO Box 218, Hawthorn, Victoria, 3122.  
Tel: (03) 9214 5218  
or [resethics@swin.edu.au](mailto:resethics@swin.edu.au)

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