



Week Four: Meditation & Addiction

Managing and recovering from addiction in part relies on an individual's ability to learn and develop positive, and sustainable coping mechanisms. Modern approaches to recovery tell us that there is not a "one-size-fits" all process and the ancient teachings of Ayurveda confirm this understanding: we are all unique beings with particular constitutions. Each of us requires a particular set of self-care mechanisms to form new, healthy and lasting habits.

We know that stress is a significant factor in the development of addictive behaviours. Meditation and MBSR (Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction) techniques have been scientifically proven to reduce the psychological and physiological symptoms of stress. Regular meditation practices have also been proven through research to improve mental cognition, reduce anxiety and improve sleep patterns and quality of sleep in those with insomnia, amongst many other health benefits that come from reducing overall stress in the body and mind.

Studies done on the effects of meditation in those recovering from addictive behaviours has shown it to be an incredibly effective tool in building **resiliency**. Resiliency is described as the capacity to overcome and recover from traumatic experiences, difficulties and challenges in life, and to do so by coming out stronger, wiser and with more self-awareness. For many years, scientists maintained that the brain's plasticity, its ability to create new structures, neural pathways and to learn, was limited after childhood. New research shows that we have the ability to continually re-structure the brain and reap the benefits, well into adulthood.

The Science of Meditation

It's been proven that the more that a person practices meditation, the thicker the brain becomes in the **mid-prefrontal cortex** and the **mid-insular region** of the brain. Changing thought processes, or "changing your mind", actually changes the neural structure of the brain. With as little as 4 hours a week of mindfulness meditation, people have shown to be able to achieve advanced states of concentration and insight, and sustain a state of mindfulness that contributes to resiliency. The key to reaching these states are not the hours spent meditating but the **intention and attention of focus**.

Mindfulness practice may positively affect the amount of activity in the **amygdala**, the walnut-sized area in the center of the brain responsible for regulating emotions . When the amygdala is relaxed, the parasympathetic nervous system engages to counteract the **anxiety response**. Over time, mindfulness meditation actually thickens the bilateral, prefrontal right-insular region of the brain, the area responsible for optimism and a sense of well-being, spaciousness, and possibility. This area is also associated with creativity and an increased sense of curiosity, as well as the ability to be reflective and observe how your mind works. By building new neural connections among brain cells, we rewire the brain, and with each new neural connection, the brain is actually learning.

Through mindfulness meditation, we light up and build up the left-prefrontal cortex, associated with optimism, self-observation, and compassion, allowing ourselves to cease being dominated by the right-prefrontal cortex, which is associated with fear, depression, anxiety, and pessimism. As a result, our self-awareness and mood stability increase as our harsh judgments of others and ourselves decrease.

Left Pre-Frontal Cortex >>> Optimism, Self-Observation, Compassion

Right Pre-Frontal Cortex >>> Fear, Depression, Anxiety, Pessimism



Through regular meditation practices, people managing addictive patterns and behaviours can actively begin to re-wire their brain for relaxation and stress-reduction, assisting in reducing the dependency on external substances and behaviours.

Further research on the benefits of meditation:

<https://www.headspace.com/science/meditation-research>

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/feeling-it/201309/20-scientific-reasons-start-meditating-today>

The Doshas and Meditation

We understand that meditation and mindfulness practices are beneficial for everyone; but can we take it a step further? Ayurveda teaches us that each person is unique and therefore each person requires unique tools to manage their healing. When we are caring for someone with addictive behaviours, there are many factors to be aware of that contribute to their particular patterns, and one of those factors is their constitution. For example, if someone is healing from PTSD, and managing addictive behaviours, we may not recommend that they sit, alone, in silence with their eyes closed for an extended period of time, because this may be triggering for their current condition and cause anxiety and panic, as well as traumatic flashbacks. Instead, we could take this into consideration and recommend that they practice within a small, supportive and comfortable group setting, or with one other person, as they are guided through a meditation, perhaps with calming music or natural sounds.

Practices for VATA: Focus on guided practices within groups or alone with a shorter audio recording. Vata's often aren't keen on sitting in stillness in one place, for too long, so it is wise to consider the length of the meditation also. EX: counting meditation, loving-kindness meditation,

visualization meditations. **For visualizations:** Focus on earthy, watery, and fiery images including mountains, bodies of water, flowers like rose or lotus, and light from a fire or the sun at dawn. **Colours** to focus on include gold and saffron. **Affirmations:** Basic peace and fearlessness of their higher nature and learning to let go of worry and anxiety and surrender and faith in a higher power.

Practices for PITTA: Focus on practices that help to reduce anger, jealousy and frustration, while improving focus and self-love. EX: Loving Kindness meditation, mindfulness meditation, visualizations meditations. **For visualizations:** Focus on non-fiery images like a mountains, a forest, a lake or the ocean, rain clouds, the deep blue sky, flowers with cooling colors, the moon or the stars. **Colours** to focus on include white, dark blue, and emerald green. **Affirmations:** increasing forgiveness, compassion and love, and surrendering anger, for peace and happiness of all beings seeking forgiveness for their actions that might have harmed other creatures.

Practices for KAPHA: Focus on practices that encourage the release of emotional attachments and counter mental lethargy and stagnation. Kapha can be prone to falling asleep during meditation, so cultivating a wakeful attention is key, as is incorporating some kind of physical movement. EX: walking meditation, visualization meditations. **For visualizations:** Focus on images that increase the fire, ether and air elements like the sun, the wind moving through the trees, or the expanse of clear blue sky. **Colours** to focus on include gold, blue, and orange. **Affirmations:** letting go of emotional stagnation and material attachments, increasing love of others.