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Mindfulness and the Art of Choice: Transform Your Life

By: Karen H. Sherman, Ph.D., Ann Arbor, MI : Loving Healing Press, 2008, 105 pages, \$15.95

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In the book *Mindfulness and the Art of Choice: Transform your Life*, psychologist Dr. Karen H. Sherman calls upon her readers to empower themselves and confront self-defeating behaviors by providing a step-by-step guide towards identifying, challenging, and changing the emotions and maladaptive behavior patterns that may inhibit individuals from creating the lives they wish to live. Her message to the reader is that life does not just happen but that we have a say in what happens and the changes we want to make. She acknowledges that we all have personal issues to overcome and she posits the idea that more often than not these issues come from childhood experiences.

Our past experiences serve as a filter through which we come to experience new events and shape how we interpret them through the past. For the author, it is imperative that we become mindful of these past experiences and the emotion associated with them so we may take action towards making a change that will lead to new results and make us "mentally freer". It is through these changes that we exercise the *art of choice*, choosing to make changes in our lives that help us achieve what Dr. Sherman and most of us would like to describe as the "good life".

Many of the approaches presented by Dr. Sherman throughout the text appear to be rooted in both a cognitive-behavioral and client-centered framework. The first half of the text presents a thorough discussion on the intricate relationship between the mind and body, its effect on behavior, and how we choose to react to it. She begins with a discussion on "living life on autopilot" meaning that much of how we deal with the world is automatic in nature and based on how we learned to deal with the world in the past.

The author explains that we operate by using a childhood filtering system, created from feelings that were "wired in" as a child and then were carried along into adulthood. The problem is that what worked during childhood as an important survival mechanism may not necessarily serve you as an adult. As such, it is important to carefully examine where the emotions and feelings come from so that we can react in a more positive and healthy way.

The author presents over twenty exercises throughout the text that can be used for the purposes of "rewiring" the brain to make new connections so that old situations will not result in the same reactions. These are presented predominantly in the second half of the text and encompass a wide array of situations from dealing with fear, controlling your anger, managing your impulsivity, and learning how to confront others in a positive and proactive way. These exercises stem from the cognitive-behavioral approaches discussed earlier including learning how to use your body as a thermometer to become aware of bodily reactions to emotions, free association exercises to release latent feelings and associations, and engaging in visualizations to help identify and work through the more challenging experiences.

As an example, the author suggests that visualization is helpful in coping with stressful experiences from childhood that influence how an individual reacts to similar situations as an adult. By visualizing yourself as a young child again in a distressing situation you can replay it with a different ending so that you make a different connection to it. In this way, the past experience becomes less distressing as you are able to consider alternatives endings to it. You can create an imagery of unconditional acceptance of whatever has been expressed (Exercise 76).

While the techniques presented by Dr. Sherman are not all necessarily new given their cognitive-behavioral base, her presentation is innovative with a client-centered feel to it. Her explanations of key concepts are straightforward with little psychological jargon that can distract readers unfamiliar with them. She presents herself genuinely to the reader by providing excerpts from her own life to demonstrate key concepts and describes the real life applicability of what she is sharing. Because of her belief that much of our current struggles come from childhood experiences, she makes a point to address the child within and provide for the reader a space to begin loving themselves unconditionally (Exercise 2) with the goal of ultimately helping the client become “fully actualized”. This can be achieved by being mindful and exercising the art of choice in his/her life.

The author presents unique case examples taken from her private practice and personal metaphors to illustrate the more complicated concepts. For example, to illustrate the point that one must understand the root cause for our automatic reactions to emotion, she discusses one’s automatic reaction to weeds in a garden. She notes that most people react to the weeds by chipping away at the weeds and, in doing so, expend a considerable amount of effort and energy. Despite ones’ best efforts, the weeds grow again. This metaphor helps make the point that in order to get to the real problem, one must get to the root of it. It is the use of examples and visualization such as these that add the real life feel to the text and allows readers who may not be able to quickly grasp abstract concepts to understand them.

One of the major strengths of the text is the fact that the author makes a point to discuss the process of change throughout the text. Change is an inevitable process in personal growth. As such, the author’s discussion of this process at different points within the book helps the reader better understand the highs and lows of change thereby helping the reader not to be discouraged by the uncomfortable feelings that change so often produces. With this in mind, Dr. Sherman helps the reader gain insight into the process of change by noting that it is uncomfortable and acknowledges that one’s decision to avoid changes in his/her behavior feeds a certain purpose.

Dr. Sherman notes that some of the rationalizations in choosing not to change include feeling comfortable, feeling as if you are in control, and releasing yourself from responsibility. She also encourages clients to monitor their progress in making changes for themselves throughout their personal growth journey. The author makes a point of reminding the reader that change cannot happen overnight and that it is only through their commitment that change can actually take place.

An additional strength of *Mindfulness and the Art of Choice* is the author’s distinction between awareness and mindfulness. While she acknowledges the importance of being aware of our feelings and emotions, she recognizes that merely being aware is not enough. She defines mindfulness as a more active process of awareness in that one must act in the here and now to think about what is going on at the present moment.

A limitation of this book is that some of the exercises may appear to be too simplistic. For example, one of the exercises which the author refers back to quite often is the “Quieting” visualization of the child self with the adult self. In as few as five steps, she guides the reader in creating a situation where the adult self communicates to the child self in a new and loving way to establish the unconditional regard. While this exercise can be a great tool in helping to develop positive self-regard, the clinician may need to augment the exercise.

The clinician may provide the client with additional steps to help the client visualize and implement the exercise as well as educate them about its utility which may not be so obvious in the text. This may be particularly the case for clients whose thinking style is less abstract and more concrete. As such, the text is recommended for use with adult clients who have some level of self-awareness and/or potential for insight. It is recommended that the text be used with clients who are high functioning, motivated, and goal directed. Clients experiencing anxiety or depression as a result of life transitions, maladaptive relationship patterns, and/or feeling “stuck” in their

life would most benefit from using Dr. Sherman's text in treatment.

The structure of the books allows clinicians to be able to use the text flexibly in their practice. The clinician can choose specific exercises deemed appropriate for the client. The exercises in the text can be used in session or assigned to the client as homework. Nevertheless, it is strongly encouraged that time be spent to process the exercises with the client. This is particularly important for those exercises that may give rise to feelings that the client may not be able to handle on their own. It is in this way that the utility of the tools presented in *Mindfulness and the Art of Choice* can be maximized and ultimately help the client make the changes needed to live the life they want.