



# Recovery Notes

Susan F. Walsh, Ph.D. LCSW

*Scientific Recovery*

COMPASSIONATE • PRIVATE • PERSONALIZED • PROVEN

For Problems with Alcohol

OUTPATIENT TREATMENT FOR HIGH-PROFILE WOMEN

2011 • ISSUE 3



## Mindfulness Meditation: A Tool to Enhance Alcohol Recovery

*The term meditation refers to a set of techniques, most of which started in Eastern spiritual traditions. These techniques have been used throughout the world for thousands of years. Today, women use meditation outside traditional settings for health and wellness purposes.*

In meditation, a woman learns to focus her attention and to suspend the stream of thoughts that normally occupy the mind. This practice has been found to result in a state of greater physical relaxation, mental calmness, and psychological balance. Practicing meditation can change how a woman *reacts* to the flow of emotions and thoughts in her mind.

### FOUR COMPONENTS OF MEDITATION

#### ① A quiet location.

Many meditators prefer a quiet place with as few distractions as possible. This is particularly helpful for beginners.

#### ② A specific, comfortable posture.

Meditation can be done while sitting on the floor or on a chair, lying down, standing, or walking.

#### ③ A focus of attention.

Focusing one's attention is usually a part of meditation. For example, the meditator may focus on a mantra such as a specifically chosen word or set of words, on an object, or on the breath.

#### ④ An open attitude.

Maintaining an open attitude during meditation means letting distractions come and go naturally without stopping to think about them. When distracting thoughts occur, they are not suppressed; they are acknowledged and then the meditator gently brings her attention back to the focus of attention. In some types of meditation, the meditator learns to observe the rising and falling of thoughts and emotions as they spontaneously occur.

Susan F. Walsh, Ph.D. LCSW

333 East Ontario Street Chicago, IL 60611 • (312) 642-4333 • [www.scientificrecovery.com](http://www.scientificrecovery.com)

## MINDFULNESS MEDITATION

Mindfulness meditation originated in Buddhism. It is based on the concept of being *mindful*, or having an increased awareness and total acceptance of the present. While meditating, the meditator is taught to bring all of her attention to the sensation of the flow of her breath in and out of her body. The goal is to develop an awareness of the thoughts, sensations, and emotional states that are being experienced during this process, without engaging with, reacting to, or judging those experiences. This helps the meditator learn to experience thoughts and emotions in normal daily life with greater balance and acceptance and with less reactivity.

## MINDFULNESS MEDITATION AND RELAPSE PREVENTION

In overcoming an addiction, lapses are the rule, not the exception. Up to 80 percent of alcoholics treated for a drinking problem will drink again. Such statistics

*An episode of backsliding is seen as a chance to learn, an opportunity to develop better strategies for anticipating and avoiding or overcoming urges to drink.*

have inspired a new psychology of addiction that puts the problems of lapse and relapse front and center. Overcoming a habit is understood to be a slow and halting process that is often plagued with slip-ups and setbacks. The process has been compared to learning to ride a bike, in that almost everyone falls at least once.

This new psychology recognizes that a lapse can be just a stumble on the road to

recovery. If handled effectively, a lapse can actually open the door to lasting success. A lapse can provide useful information. An episode of backsliding is seen as a chance to learn, an opportunity to develop better strategies for anticipating and avoiding or overcoming urges to drink.

Researchers are learning that the number-one predictor of lapses is *emotional*: the level of negative affect during the

*Mindfulness meditation helps women to observe their feelings and, thereby, develop a greater sense of choice.*

four to five hours leading up to the lapse. Anger, anxiety, depression, and upset are the most powerful negative feeling states, especially a bad mood that ramps up over a period of hours. It's not a matter of how a woman feels these *days*, but a matter of how she feels in the *hours* and *minutes* before she takes a drink. Women with drinking problems are usually convinced that alcohol will help them to feel better in these difficult emotional states.

Practicing mindfulness meditation can help a woman to get a better sense of her own personal struggles. She can learn to anticipate the kinds of circumstances that lead her to either take a drink or continue her recovery. By getting the bigger picture, mindfulness meditation enhances a woman's ability to stand back, observe what is happening and think about what she is doing rather than being on "automatic pilot." Mindfulness meditation helps women to observe their feelings and, thereby, develop a greater sense of

choice. This improved sense of choice helps women in recovery more effectively to choose sobriety over drinking.

Mindfulness meditation also helps women to see the temporary nature of urges and cravings to drink and to accept them as thoughts that will come and go. She can learn to recognize the nature of these thoughts, learn to ride them out, and watch them pass. She can let go of them rather than give in to them.

## S.O.B.E.R. MEDITATION

S.O.B.E.R. is a meditation breathing technique that a woman can use when she is on the verge of taking a drink. It gives her a chance to stand back and look at what's going on. For example, if she is walking by a club she used to visit and the thought arises that she should just pop in to see if anybody she knows is there, **S** is for Stop. Stop walking. Then **O**, she observes herself. How she is feeling? What are her

*Mindfulness meditation can be very helpful in becoming less "reactive." It can significantly improve relapse prevention skills and complement most any recovery program.*

physical sensations and thoughts? Then **B**, she focuses on her breath. She takes a deep breath, then another and another. She centers her attention there. Then **E**, she expands her awareness so that she will have a larger sense of what would happen if she did go into the club. How would she feel? What would she risk? Finally, **R**, she responds mindfully.

The heightened state of present-focused awareness that is encouraged by meditation can directly counteract the learned automatic response to use alcohol when experiencing cravings and urges, particularly in response to stressful circumstances. Mindfulness meditation can be very helpful in becoming less "reactive." It can significantly improve relapse prevention skills and complement most any recovery program.

— Susan F. Walsh, Ph.D.

## Scientific Recovery

Scientific Recovery is an evidence-based treatment program for women seeking state-of-the-art, individual therapy for problem drinking. Our focus is on professional women who have recognized that alcohol is a problem they no longer want in their lives. Our goal is to assist women not only to eliminate their alcohol dependence, but also to be happy that they did.



**Susan F. Walsh, Ph.D. LCSW**

333 East Ontario Street  
Chicago, Illinois 60611  
(312) 642-4333

[www.scientificrecovery.com](http://www.scientificrecovery.com)