All Present and (Psychologically, Neurobiologically, and Phenomenologically) Accounted for

A review of

The Mindful Therapist: A Clinician’s Guide to Mindsight and Neural Integration
by Daniel J. Siegel

Reviewed by
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Many traditional spiritual practices foster personal and transpersonal growth through emphasizing what is sometimes called mindfulness, which Kabat-Zinn (1994) succinctly defined as “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally” (p. 4). Mindfulness practices, under many different names, have also long been part of secular psychologies, such as Freud’s (1914/1960) free-association techniques emphasizing “evenly hovering attention . . . [as the] fundamental rule of psychoanalysis” (p. 147). These approaches remain essential to various other well-established schools of therapy (e.g., Gestalt therapy, hypnotherapy). However, recently there has been a burgeoning growth of interest in such psychological approaches subsumed under the term mindfulness,
evidencing that old wine is often more successful when rebottled. Siegel’s book *The Mindful Therapist: A Clinician’s Guide to Mindsight and Neural Integration* emphasizes the therapeutic centrality of mindfulness (also see Martin, 1997), especially *presence*, a state presumably related to mindfulness and relevant to several strands of emerging work (e.g., Brown & Ryan, 2003; Childs, 2007). This is also congruent with spiritual wisdom teachings, as in the traditional story of a master pouring tea into an overly intellectualizing student’s already filled cup to illustrate the necessity of presence in order to receive new teachings.

Beyond offering a guidebook, Siegel assures readers that mindfulness approaches are not just speculative New Age fluff, as he grounds many of his psychological assertions within the context of cutting-edge neurobiological theories and findings. Siegel also provides a wealth of experiential exercises in which readers can validate his points by using first-person methods through engaging in direct phenomenological explorations. He thus offers a powerful triadic argument by juxtaposing psychology, neurobiology, and phenomenology, creating a stable edifice supporting his views. Just as the three legs of a stool provide the simplest geometric form having stability against gravity (i.e., little is gained by a four-legged chair over a three-legged stool, whereas it takes great talent to successfully balance on a pogo stick), Siegel’s use of three parallel narratives is an engaging literary device, skillfully employed as he weaves back and forth.

Siegel also attempts to bridge intrapersonal and interpersonal approaches to psychology within a neurobiological context. In this, he explores many interesting implications of his approach, such as how both therapist and client may reciprocally benefit from mindfully enhanced presence through a type of shared consciousness, befitting a book that is within a series on interpersonal neurobiology. He also alludes to deeper transpersonal implications of mindfulness in terms of developing a widened sense of identity that recognizes the radical interconnectedness of the individual, not only with others but also with the cosmos.

Siegel’s volume is relatively short, but it contains an enormous wealth of concisely written information. However, his exposition often provides only one perspective among many possible perspectives, without acknowledging alternatives. For example, Siegel’s definition of *mind* as being “an embodied and relational process that regulates the flow of energy and information” (p. 25) does not address competing definitions of mind within traditions of mindfulness that view mind as spiritual (i.e., disembodied) and transcendent (i.e., nonrelational).

Siegel writes in a conversational tone, casually inviting therapists to enter his complex worldview, which straddles across many disparate domains of knowledge. For example, he situates his psychological approach across theories widely ranging from the *A* of attachment to the *Z* of zone of proximal development. And his conversational tone belies the complexity of the ideas expressed, which are breathtaking in the sense that I often found myself gasping in attempts to comprehend their various interwoven strands. One thing that led to my confusion involved frequent leaps among various mindfulness-related constructs, such as
presence and mindsight, without a clear delineation among their meanings. More than occasionally, Siegel alludes to his many previous works to bolster conclusions that seem far reaching, offering assurance that scientific grounding is available elsewhere (Note: Some helpful multimedia and e-resources are available for free at the book’s website). Siegel’s frequent references to his many other works on this topic evidences that his book is a distillation of considerable deep thought, but my own lack of familiarity with these previous writings left me more than occasionally questioning the actual strength of some of his arguments, as crucial evidentiary links were absent. Admittedly, Siegel intended this volume to be popularly accessible as a clinician’s guide, so perhaps he thought providing scientific details that are available elsewhere within his other writings was unnecessary. However, I frequently wanted to see evidence in the present while ruminating on some of his more intriguing conclusions.

In addition, early in the book Siegel promises to avoid using excessive acronyms after admitting that he has a penchant for their overuse. Evidently he could not help himself because, as the book progresses, more and more acronyms creep in, which often led to my having to shuffle to and fro to recollect what the various acronyms stand for—a glossary of acronyms would have been very helpful. Siegel also uses many alliterations and similar literary devices, although he acknowledges that some readers find these to be helpful mnemonics and others do not (unfortunately, I am in the latter category).

Despite these minor stylistic concerns, Siegel’s book holds together impressively well, even if it provides only glimpses of a very complex system of understanding and practice. I think it would be a useful introduction to therapists who want to explore incorporating mindfulness approaches into their own professional development and/or personal growth practices, especially those who want to be assured of its worth from either or both a neurobiological and phenomenological, as well as a psychological, vantage. Although there is simply not sufficient depth in this one volume to support many of its far-reaching conclusions, I feel enticed to learn more about Siegel’s approach. Perhaps this popular distillation would be an appropriate entry point for those wanting to understand the larger worldview of the author by reading his other works, which is my intention.

References


