

Relational Insight Meditation

As a Practice for Therapists Interested in Enhancing Psychological Flexibility

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Introduction

In order to be able to effectively deliver ACT it is essential that therapists be able to apply the ACT frame in their own lives. Cultivating a personal meditation practice is one vehicle for deepening the psychological flexibility established through the core processes of ACT. Research also suggests that meditation can enhance therapeutic factors beneficial for delivering ACT skillfully including attentional capacity, empathy, and self compassion. Meditation is traditionally an individual silent practice. Conversely, psychotherapy in an inherently relational practice that involves speaking and listening. Insight Dialogue (Kramer, 2007) is a relational insight meditation practice designed to bring the mindfulness and reflection of silent meditation directly into interpersonal relationships. As such, Insight Dialogue offers therapists who are interested in cultivating a meditation practice the potential for greater integration between meditation and psychotherapy. This poster provides an overview of Insight Dialogue and its potential benefits for therapists who provide ACT. Preliminary findings from evaluation questionnaires completed by Insight Dialogue retreat participants are also presented.

~ Pause

I invite you to slow down, to find the present moment, and pause—here and now. Pause from reading and from thinking for a moment and notice the body. What is the posture of the body? Do you feel the shoulders? Where are the hands? You might notice any sensation or tensions in the body. As you pay attention to the body, you might ask “What’s this moment like?” Pause. It’s like this now.

The Practice of Insight Dialogue

Insight Dialogue is a formal meditation practice based in Vipassana or Insight Meditation that explicitly evolved to take place in relationship. Six meditation instructions or guidelines form the core of the practice. Engaging in mindful dialogue with one or more other people supported by instruction in the guidelines and by contemplations that encourage a direct and intimate inquiry into the nature, causes, and release of human suffering is the form of the practice.

The Guidelines

The Insight Dialogue guidelines offer support for a receptive awareness of present moment experience amid the challenges of relationship, helping to counter our limiting habits of interpersonal encounter. Although the guidelines are designed to work together, they are typically taught individually, in sequence.

Pause and Relax establish the traditional meditative framework of mindfulness and tranquility. Open invites us to extend the receptive awareness cultivated in Pause and Relax to the world around us. Open opens the door to mutuality; it is the basis for interpersonal meditation.

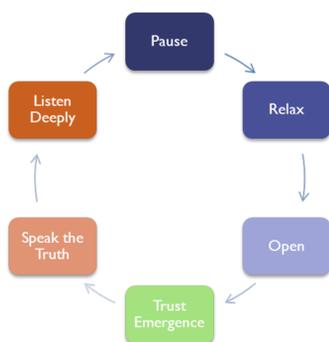


Table 1. Insight Dialogue Guidelines

Pause	Temporal pause; stepping out of habitual thoughts and reactions into experience in the present moment; mindfulness.
Relax	Invitation to calm the body and mind; receiving whatever sensations, thoughts, and feelings are present; acceptance.
Open	Extension of mindfulness from internal to include the external; spaciousness; matures to include the relational moment; mutuality.
Trust Emergence	Entering the relational moment without an agenda; awareness of the impermanence of thoughts and feelings; allowing experience to unfold; “don’t know” mind.
Listen Deeply	Listening mindfully, with an awareness that is relaxed and open; ripens into unhindered receptivity to the unfolding words, emotions, and presence of another.
Speak the Truth	Articulation of the truth of one’s subjective experience with mindfulness; discernment of what to say amid the universe of possibilities; ripens into an acute sensitivity to the voice of the moment that “speaks through” the meditator.

A Snapshot of the Practice



~ Relax

When you Pause, what do you notice? Is there tension around the eyes? Let it melt away. Are the lips or jaw tight? Is the belly tensed? Let it soften. Invite the body to let go, not to fight or resist but to release, to yield. Relax.

As Relax deepens and you become aware of more subtle tensions and emotions, it becomes clear that all this stress and tension is not going to vanish suddenly. “Relax” becomes “accept.” Whatever sensations, emotions or thoughts arise into the moment, we simply receive them. We release resistance, Relax, accept.

Insight Dialogue is taught and practiced in a number of contexts—retreats, community practice groups, online practice (e.g., via Skype), and more recently in the Relational Insight Meditation Program, a pilot program offering retreats and distance learning for mental health professionals.

In a group gathered for Insight Dialogue practice, participants begin with a period of individual meditation. Participants are then invited into pairs or larger groupings. The teacher or facilitator typically begins by offering one of the guidelines.

Participants are then offered a topic or contemplation to reflect upon in the dialogue. The contemplations are typically drawn from Buddhist or other wisdom traditions (e.g., impermanence, suffering, joy, equanimity) or more contemporary framings of the shared human experience (e.g., roles and identities in various aspects of our lives, judgments of self and other).

When a bell is rung participants begin their dialogues. During the dialogue, the teacher or facilitator periodically rings a bell to bring the meditators back to into silence, occasionally offering guidance to help mindfulness stabilize. When the bell is rung again, participants reengage with their meditation partner(s). With this form, participants are cultivating meditative qualities of mind, while exploring essential aspects of human experience in relationship.

An experience of Open:

The room was quiet. Everyone was still. The same stillness that was “out there” was “in here.” Dave said he felt friendly and uncharacteristically relaxed with our group. Hearing him and knowing what he said did not interrupt my mindfulness of my body or of my emotional state. The hearing and the mindfulness were all part of the same experience of knowing the moment.

Evaluation Findings

The development of Insight Dialogue has been informed by the use of evaluation questionnaires completed by Insight Dialogue retreat participants. Although open-ended questions predominate, questionnaires for some retreats included structured assessments of constructs related to key aspects of the practice. Here we present findings from three Insight Dialogue retreats in which portions of the Self-Compassion Questionnaire (Neff, 2003) were administered before and after the retreat.

Method

Participants

67 participants in 5-7 day residential Insight Dialogue retreats
 • 82% of all retreat participants
 • 21 Male, 46 Female
 • 27-77 years
 (M = 52, SD = 10.9)

Measures & Procedures

Self-Compassion Scale (SCS)
 • Subscales used: Self-kindness, self-judgment, common humanity
 • Pre-retreat instructions: “How you typically act toward yourself in difficult times” (standard)
 • Post-retreat instructions: “How you acted toward yourself at difficult moments during this retreat”
 • Analysis: Paired samples t-test

Open-Ended Questions

Questions:

- What, if anything, did you learn about yourself from participating in this retreat?
- How, if at all, was your experience of being with other people during this retreat different than it typically is in daily life?
- If and how was your experience of this retreat different than during individual silent retreats; if no prior retreats, during individual silent practice?
- What did you find most helpful or beneficial about this retreat?

Analysis (preliminary):

- Themes identified and coded using General Inductive Approach (Thomas, 2006). Themes identified by at least 10% of participants reported.

Results

Self-Compassion Scale:

SCS scores indicated that participants experienced significantly more “self-kindness” and less “self-judgment” in difficult moments during an Insight Dialogue retreat than they typically experienced in difficult times. Scores on the Common Humanity subscale (recognizing that suffering and personal failure is part of the shared human experience) did not differ.

Table 2. Mean scores on SCS before and after Insight Dialogue retreat participation

SCS Subscale	How act toward self in difficult times	
	Typical	During retreat
Self-kindness	3.73 (0.62)	4.13 (0.68)***
Self-judgment	2.51 (0.72)	1.91 (0.60)***
Common humanity	3.87 (0.69)	3.74 (0.80)

Note: Standard deviations in parentheses; ***p < .001

Table 3. Themes identified in narrative descriptions of experiences during an Insight Dialogue retreat

At ease/more relaxed with others (n = 7, 10.4%)	“Much, much more relaxed and at the same time exciting, because my intent to be right there with whatever arose in their presence created a ‘between’ that was really vibrant and luminous.”
More connected/feeling of intimacy with others (n = 8, 11.9%)	“Way more eye contact, more intimacy, more scary, more FUN!... Other’s insights felt useful to me too. And I found myself feeling love for them for no apparent reason!”
Experience of not-self/self as construction (n = 8, 11.9%)	“I had this insight, for the first time, that there is no self, and no outside and no inside or ‘me and this world’. It’s like it was all just one!”
Empathy/compassion toward others (n = 10, 14.9%)	“I felt a whole lot more compassion and actual love towards people than I generally do.”
Compassion/acceptance/kindness toward self (n = 15, 22.4%)	“[I learned] That I have been leaning toward and aspiring to perfection/escape on my spiritual path rather than practicing acceptance, openness and metta [lovingkindness] towards myself. Learned more how compassionate practice looks/feels.”
Greater or more rapid insight than in traditional retreats (n = 16, 23.9%)	“Mindfulness was amplified and transformative in much less time.”

Potential Benefits For ACT Therapists

How does one teach therapists who spend their days working with people overwhelmed by anxiety, depression, addiction or chronic physical pain — “to be in the present moment with full awareness and openness to our experience, and to take action guided by our values” (Harris, 2009, p.12)?

The disciplines that train therapists have generally succeeded better at teaching theories and techniques of therapy than at cultivating the capacity to bring to the therapeutic relationship the kind of psychological flexibility ACT therapists seek to establish in their clients.

Teaching therapists and trainees mindfulness practices have shown some promise in addressing this gap (Hick & Bien, 2008). However, most such approaches have sought to develop mindfulness using forms that are solitary and must therefore rely on the premise that new habits and responses developed in personal silent practice will transfer, be accessible, and capable of expression using language in the heat of real-time human interactions. Because Insight Dialogue is a formal practice of dialogic meditation, it supports this challenge directly.

In Insight Dialogue practice, essential aspects of the shared human experience are contemplated in dialogue and structured by a series of guidelines. Through this practice, therapists have the opportunity to cultivate the capacity to bring to the therapeutic relationship the present moment awareness, acceptance, and loosening of identification with thought and self developed in meditation. The living wisdom and compassion that arises in relational practice yield insight born of direct and intimate experience of human suffering and its release.

A therapist’s reflections:

My experience in Insight Dialogue practice seems pertinent to every aspect of my work in psychotherapy by its effect on my presence, deep listening and truthful speaking. I look forward, in particular, to sitting mindfully with each and every client and being aware of the same emptiness that is the basis of all our experience and unifies us all, eradicating the sense of other, difference and alienation.

References

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