



2. THE ACCOMMODATION TRAP

Introduction

This workshop should ideally be held between workshop 3 and 5 in the student component.

Specific workshop objectives

At the end of the workshop, the parents will be able to:

- Understand mindfulness and its benefits;
- Identify their child's type of intolerance;
- Understand the concept of accommodation;
- Target accommodating behaviours that they use;
- Replace their accommodating behaviours with new solutions;
- Discuss the necessary changes with their child.

How the workshop works

1. Welcome the parents and present the workshop objectives and how it will work.

A. Introduction to Mindfulness (15 min)

1. In preparation for the workshop, first read the complementary sheet on mindfulness at the end of this workshop.
2. Using the following link, play this video for parents to help them better understand mindfulness (André, 2018): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_NC86pJWA7k (time: 2 min. 26 sec.). Make sure you activate the English subtitles available for this video. Ask the parents what they learned from the video. Ask them if they have any questions about mindfulness, if they've ever heard of it, and if they have any concerns. Complete the explanations about mindfulness using the complementary sheet.
3. Then suggest that the parents try a mindfulness exercise based on breathing. Ask them to sit comfortably and close their eyes if they want to. Remind them that if they feel uncomfortable during the breathing exercise, they can always open their eyes and shift their focus to another part of their body.



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4. Play this recording: https://sante-mentale-jeunesse.usherbrooke.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Medit_Mindful-Breathing.mp3. (Centre RBC d'expertise universitaire en santé mentale, n.d.).
5. At the end, ask parents how they felt during the exercise and how they feel now. Tell them they can find the recording at the address in their *Handy parent guide*.
6. Remind them that their child is also doing mindfulness exercises during the workshops. To increase the benefits of mindfulness, their child is encouraged to practise the exercises at home. As parents, they can encourage them to practise and even do some of the exercises with them, if they want. The best results are seen with time and practice.
7. Tell them about the different mindfulness apps that are available: *Headspace* or another app you know about. Take some time to demonstrate them and install them on the parents' phones. Let them know about the many meditation videos on YouTube; they and their child can choose the ones they like best.

B. Intolerances (10 min)

1. Continue on the theme of intolerances. Share the video called *Intolerances: lenses that distort reality* <https://vimeo.com/1113621854>.
2. Lead a discussion about the video. Use the following questions as a guide:
 - What did you learn from this video?
 - Do you recognize your child in any of the intolerances mentioned?

C. The accommodation trap (30 min)

1. Now introduce the concept of accommodation. As you give the following explanations, remember to pause occasionally to let the parents react. Give them a chance to express what they think or feel about the content and give examples.
2. Introduce the parents to the definition of accommodation: Accommodation consists in altering your parenting style to prevent or lessen the discomfort your child feels because of their anxiety (Thompson-Hollands *et al.*, 2014).

Tip for facilitators

Some parents use accommodation a lot, and have done so since their child was very young, often without being aware of it. Others are anxious themselves and project this onto their child. Regardless, it's important that they don't blame themselves too much or judge the other parents. Many parents feel terribly guilty once they realize that their accommodating behaviours may have had negative consequences on their child or perpetuated their anxiety. So, you're encouraged to normalize this phenomenon.

3. Point out that accommodation is normal, because one of their jobs as a parent is to care

for their child, meet their needs, and protect them from harm. For that reason, most parents manipulate or adapt certain situations to help their child cope better. It's actually hard to avoid completely: When the counter's too high, we pull up a footstool so our child can cook with us.

4. However, point out that by being overly accommodating, they can actually make their child more anxious, since this is a form of avoidance. Remind them of the consequences of avoidance behaviours and the importance of helping their child to step outside of their comfort zone instead. Extensive research involving children with anxiety has shown that while these accommodating behaviours may lessen the child's discomfort in the short term, they actually maintain and even increase it in the long term (Ginsburg *et al.*, 2004). Accommodation can also send an implicit message to your child that they are incapable of doing things on their own or that they are right to be worried. So, it's important to be aware of the harmful effects of resorting to accommodation too often.
5. Even though accommodating behaviours maintain and worsen anxiety in the long run, explain to the parents that forcing the child into scary situations too soon, without guidance, and without respecting their boundaries, is equally harmful and can also make their anxiety worse. Remind them of the importance of small steps.
6. Ask the parents to give examples of accommodating behaviours from their own lives. Finish with the following examples (inspired by Benito *et al.*, 2015; Lebowitz *et al.*, 2012):
 - Changing the family routine and making exceptions;
 - Providing too much security: phone calls, hovering, asking questions, etc.;
 - Enabling the child when it comes to avoiding anxiety-provoking situations (school, social situations);
 - Speaking or acting on the child's behalf;
 - Following strict rules and rituals;
 - Limiting their responsibilities and independence.
7. Explain to them that easing up on their accommodating behaviours is likely to force them outside of their own comfort zone. These changes may even seem counterintuitive, because they cause the child to feel uncomfortable in the short term. Remind the parents that while they are responsible for protecting their child, they also have a role to play in developing their child's independence, and to do this, they will need to work on accommodation.
8. Make them aware that these accommodating behaviours are usually a deep-seated part of the family dynamic. Their child may react to this change, momentarily becoming more anxious, angry, or sad. They will need to remember that they're doing this for their child's own good and tell their child that they trust them and believe in them and their abilities. This may be harder on some days, but it's important to stick with it (inspired by Lebowitz *et al.*, 2011a; Lebowitz *et al.*, 2011b)

9. Tell the parents that the first step will be having a conversation about this with their child. Let the parents know that their child will have already heard about accommodation in their workshop, along with the possible changes in how they will deal with their child's behaviour. It's important that this conversation take place when everyone is calm and receptive. If the child is anxious or the parent is feeling very emotional, it's best to postpone it. If possible, it's a good idea for both parents to discuss the issue and the necessary changes beforehand; they can then speak to the child together.
10. Introduce the parents to some strategies to help them adopt behaviours that are more helpful for their child (Masia *et al.*, 1999). These strategies can be found in their *Handy parent guide*:
 - Listen carefully and be empathetic;
 - Remind the child that you trust them;
 - Encourage them to be independent and self-sufficient;
 - Model and encourage brave behaviours;
 - Do breathing or visualization exercises with the child;
 - Plan opportunities for exposure (baby steps);
 - Provide opportunities for exposure;
 - Be positive and supportive: celebrate all efforts;
 - Remind them about emotion management strategies;
 - Help them reformulate their thoughts using specific questions;
 - Pay attention to your own emotions, which can influence accommodating behaviours;
 - Seek help.

D. Accommodation at home (30 min)

1. Now ask the parents to take a moment to reflect on their accommodating behaviours. Give them about 10 minutes to answer the following questions, which are in their *Handy parent guide*:
 - Do I tend to use accommodating behaviours? If so, in which situations? If not, do I tend to push my child into scary situations too quickly?
 - Which new strategies could I use to help my child manage their anxiety better?
2. Once the exercise is over, reconvene as a group and talk about the parents' answers.
3. Then, ask the parents to individually write down a few sentences of the conversation they plan to have with their child. They can use this script for inspiration:

"I know how hard it is for you to [fill in the blank]. I understand it scares you or makes you feel really anxious. I want you to know this is completely normal and that everyone gets scared sometimes. But I also want you to know that it's my job, as a parent, to help you do better at the things you find hard, which is exactly what I've decided to do. We'll be working on this for a while, and I know it'll probably take some time, but I love you too much not to help you. We'll talk about this again soon, and we'll come up with ideas to help you cope better. I'm really proud of you!" (Lebowitz *et al.*, 2014).

4. Also ask the parents to identify strategies to use in situations where their child is anxious, and they tend to accommodate them. Ask them to draw up a short personal action plan of the behaviours they could adopt to help their child achieve their goal. Remind them of the importance of small steps.

For example, if their child wants to hang out with kids their age but tends to stick close to their parents at social events because they're shy, the parents can step away for a certain period of time; they could also avoid answering questions for the child, let the child answer the phone, suggest a fun activity they can invite friends to, etc.

5. When the parents are finished, lead a group discussion on their action plans. Ask them to specifically describe some of the things they could do. Encourage the parents to share their ideas, which could help them to solidify their own action plans.

E. Conclusion and invitation (5 min)

1. Encourage the parents to follow their action plan once they've had a conversation with their child. Ask them to pay attention to any changes or problems they may notice, which they will discuss at the next workshop.



Complementary sheet

What is mindfulness and how does it work?

Mindfulness is paying close attention to your sensations, thoughts, or emotions, without labelling them as good or bad, wanted or unwanted. In other words, we don't judge them, we simply observe them. Mindfulness allows us to get in touch with what's going on inside us and around us; over time, it helps us to be less critical. In general, we tend to regularly criticize and judge our environment, our family and friends, and ourselves (Baer, 2003; Broderick and Metz, 2011).

Mindfulness can be practised formally, using meditations such as body scanning, or informally, through activities such as mindful walking. There are different types of informal meditation or activities that allow you to tap into the different spheres of mindfulness (senses, emotions, perceptions, presence, etc.) (Kaiser Greenland, 2016).

Mindfulness, whether practised formally or informally, is a way to be in the present moment, to better understand what's going on inside you, and to find an anchor point, which is often your breathing. It can be a powerful tool for regulating stress (Holzel *et al.*, 2011). The important thing about mindfulness is to choose methods that you enjoy, that you're comfortable with, and that feel good.

During the workshops, the students will have the opportunity to experiment with the many forms of mindfulness, after which they can choose the ones best suited to their personal journey.

Mindfulness can have the following benefits (Keng *et al.*, 2011):

- Improve communication;
- Develop and master the senses;
- Manage stress and emotions;
- Calm the mind to become more open to learning;
- Maintain quality relationships with oneself, others, and the environment.

Are there any precautions when it comes to mindfulness?

As with any activity, some people may love it and others may hate it. Some students may embrace it quickly and others, much later in life or never. Research shows that mindfulness can have beneficial effects in most people (Felver *et al.*, 2016; Zenner *et al.*, 2014). Conversely, other people may find it unpleasant, uncomfortable, painful, even harmful (Dobkin *et al.*, 2012). There can be risks associated with the intensity of the activity, the person's vulnerability, or the way the information is conveyed. Some of your students risk experiencing negative effects. Unfortunately, the literature doesn't let us clearly identify which students are most at risk. However, you can take some precautions. If possible, find out which students are most sensitive, emotionally and cognitively. And pay attention to the students' body language as you lead the activity:

- Let the students know that they may feel uncomfortable. This is usually temporary and

doesn't mean that mindfulness isn't right for them:

- Be prepared (you or another facilitator) to provide support to students who express discomfort or simply need to talk;
- Let the students know they can stop if they start to feel uncomfortable or uneasy. At this point, you can suggest that they refocus their attention on something else, doodle, or even read;
- Mindfulness is a lifestyle that not everyone has to follow. It's completely voluntary and can't be forced;
- Activities that involve focusing on their breathing may be uncomfortable for some students with anxiety or depression. If the students still want to learn about mindfulness or participate in the activity, they can instead focus on their heartbeat, or sounds or objects in the classroom. Gradually, they may be able to shift their focus back to their body and breathing;
- Let the students know that mindfulness leads to pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral experiences. They may experience feelings of calm, relaxation, happiness, and well-being, just as they may feel physical discomfort, sadness, agitation, and sleepiness; these are all perfectly normal;
- Remind the students that they are the best judges of what's good and not good for them. They are responsible for their own well-being—in the present moment and in the long term.

In short, your role as facilitator includes watching for the students' reactions and being aware that these can be positive, negative, or neutral, depending on the students' personalities, tolerance, and receptiveness. These reactions are all a normal part of a mindfulness practice.