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## Integrating mind-body approaches in clinical psychology: mindfulness, relaxation, and placebo effects

PROF. FRANCESCO PAGNINI

<b>Area of study:</b>	Psychology
<b>Area Code:</b>	CLPS510
<b>Credits:</b>	6 ECTS
<b>Dates</b>	Synchronous

### Description

The close relationship between the mind and body, when well understood, can lead to more effective clinical interventions in both psychology and medicine. Research and clinical practice have shown that techniques considering the body and its connection to the mind, such as relaxation techniques, contemplative practices, and mindfulness-based approaches, offer significant therapeutic benefits. Furthermore, scientific knowledge regarding the promotion of the placebo effect has highlighted how the mind can positively influence clinical outcomes. By integrating these approaches, clinicians can enhance treatment efficacy, foster holistic healing, and improve overall patient well-being.

### Course contents

The course is structured into three main modules, in addition to a general introduction. In the general introduction, the relationship between mind and body will be explored from a contemporary perspective, providing a solid theoretical foundation for understanding the deep connections between these two aspects.

- **Module 1 (The speaking body)** focuses on emotions and the body, covering topics like emotions and health, motivational systems and emotional reactions, life events and health, and clinical analysis of somatic disorders. It also delves into the placebo and nocebo effects, including a theoretical introduction, risk factors associated with nocebo, the new paradigm of open-label placebo, and presentation of empirical research.
- **Module 2 (Theory and technique of relaxation)** introduces relaxation techniques through theoretical presentations and analysis of their effectiveness based on scientific literature. It covers deep relaxation, somatic approaches such as progressive muscle relaxation and anxiety management, cognitive approaches like autogenic training, visualization techniques, and the safe place technique. Detailed exploration of breathing techniques, including basic and abdominal breathing, is also included.
- **Module 3 (Body meditation techniques in clinical practice)** provides an overview of meditation, discussing its purpose, self-awareness, meditation and contemplation, and benefits. It explores mindfulness principles and theories with practical exercises, physiological effects and benefits of mindfulness on well-being, and formal and informal mindfulness practices.



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## Prerequisites

A bachelor's degree in psychology or a related field, or equivalent professional experience, is required.

## Method of instruction

The course will be conducted using a blend of theoretical lectures, practical exercises, group work, and firsthand experience with various techniques. Each module will include in-depth presentations covering the foundational concepts, scientific literature, and clinical applications of mind-body techniques. Guided sessions will allow students to practice the techniques discussed in the lectures, such as relaxation methods, mindfulness practices, and breathing exercises. Collaborative projects and discussions will encourage students to explore and apply mind-body techniques in a supportive environment, facilitating peer learning and the exchange of diverse perspectives. Additionally, students will have opportunities to personally experience the techniques through guided practices and, for those interested, lead sessions under supervision. This comprehensive approach ensures that students not only understand the theoretical aspects of mind-body techniques but also gain practical skills and experiential knowledge, preparing them for effective clinical application.

## Course requirements

- a. Regular attendance is mandatory to ensure students fully benefit from both theoretical and practical components of the course.
- b. Active participation in guided sessions and group work is required to facilitate peer learning and practical application of techniques.
- c. Completion of collaborative projects and discussions to explore and apply mind-body techniques.
- d. Engagement in firsthand experience sessions, including leading practices under supervision for those interested.

## Grading

Presentation	1/3 of final grade
Final written exam	2/3 of final grade

## Course readings and materials

All readings and materials can be downloaded from the dedicated course blackboard pages (<http://blackboard.unicatt.it>) or be accessed through links. Further instructions on the downloading procedure will be provided in class. Both readings and lectures/class activities are crucial components of the course and are interrelated.

## Course Schedule

Lesson	Date	Topic	Main Reading/Course Material
MODULE ONE. The speaking body			
1.	7 July 2025	• Emotions and body	<u>Recommended Reading</u>



		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emotions e and health</li> <li>• Motivational systems and emotional reactions</li> </ul>	Langer, E. (2023). <i>The mindful body: Thinking our way to lasting health</i> . Little, Brown Book Group
2.	8 July 2025	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Life and health events</li> <li>• Clinical analysis of somatic diseases</li> </ul>	Materials will be uploaded on Blackboard
3.	9 July 2025	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Theoretical introduction to the placebo effect</li> <li>• Nocebo and risk factors</li> <li>• The new open-label placebo paradigm</li> <li>• Presentation of empirical research</li> </ul>	<p><u>Recommended Reading</u></p> <p>Bernstein, M. H., Blease, C., Locher, C., &amp; Brown, W. A. (2019). <i>The nocebo effect: When words make you sick</i>. Springer.</p> <p>Howick, J. (2023). <i>The power of placebos</i>. Johns Hopkins University Press.</p> <p>Miller, F. G., Colloca, L., Crouch, R. A., &amp; Kaptchuk, T. J. (Eds.). (2013). <i>The placebo: A reader</i>. Johns Hopkins University Press.</p>
<b>MODULE 2. Theory and technique of relaxation</b>			
4.	10 July 2025	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Introduction to relaxation techniques</li> <li>• Theoretical presentation and analysis of effectiveness from the literature</li> <li>• Conscious emotional activation exercises</li> <li>• Muscle tension reduction for anxiety management: techniques and exercises</li> </ul>	Materials will be uploaded on Blackboard
5.	11 July 2025	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Autogenic training</li> <li>• Safe place technique</li> <li>• Visualization techniques</li> </ul>	Materials will be uploaded on Blackboard
6.	12 July 2025	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Basic breathing and abdominal breathing</li> <li>• Biofeedback</li> </ul>	Materials will be uploaded on Blackboard



		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Overview and theory of breathing techniques</li> </ul>	
<b>MODULE THREE. Body meditation techniques in clinical practice</b>			
7.	13 July 2025	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Introduction to mindfulness: what it is and what it is for</li> <li>• Mindfulness and contemplation</li> </ul>	<u>Required Reading</u> Kabat-Zinn, J. (1990). <i>Full catastrophe living: Using the wisdom of your body and mind to face stress, pain, and illness</i> . Dell Publishing.  Kabat-Zinn, J. (2013). <i>Mindfulness for beginners: Reclaiming the present moment—and your life</i> . Sounds True.
8.	14 July 2025	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Principles and theories of mindfulness, with practical exercises</li> <li>• Formal and informal practice</li> </ul>	<u>Required Reading</u> Stahl, B., & Goldstein, E. (2010). <i>The mindfulness-based stress reduction workbook</i> . New Harbinger Publications.
9.	15 July 2025	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mental training and imagery</li> <li>• Body scan meditation</li> <li>• Breathing techniques</li> </ul>	Materials will be uploaded on Blackboard
10.	16 July 2025	Discussion of the experience and of discussing clinical cases	group supervision, with the possibility
11.	17 July 2025	EXAM	MULTIPLE CHOICE AND OPEN QUESTIONS

### Instructors' bio

**Francesco Pagnini**, Psy.D. and Ph.D., is a Full Professor of Clinical Psychology at the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milan. As psychologist and psychotherapist, he spent ten years as a researcher in the Department of Psychology at Harvard University (USA). He has been a Visiting Professor at the Karolinska Institutet (Sweden) and the University of Cambridge (UK) and is the Research Director of the Langer Mindfulness Institute (USA). His research interests focus on the mind-body relationship and the application of the concept of mindfulness. In addition to his research in clinical and health psychology, conducted in Italy, the USA, and several other countries, he is a consultant for the European Space Agency and NASA on the application of his study topics to deep space travel. He is the author of over 130 scientific contributions in international journals.

**Francesca Grosso**, psychologist, is a PhD student at the Doctoral School in Psychology at the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore in Milan. Since her early years of research she has been interested in the theme of health and illness, mind and body understood as differentiated aspects of the same identity. In Università Cattolica she is active as a tutor for courses in Research Methodology, Clinical and Rehabilitation Psychology,



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and Dynamic Psychology. Since 2021 she has been an affiliate member of the Italian Association of Psychology (AIP) and serves as a reviewer for BMC Psychology.