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

PROF. FRANCESCO PAGNINI

Term	Summer 2026
Area of study	Psychology
Credits	6 ECTS
Dates	6 – 17 July 2026 (2 weeks)
Method of instruction	In person

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 demonstrated that techniques that consider the body and its connection to the mind, such as relaxation techniques, contemplative practices, and mindfulness-based approaches, offer significant therapeutic benefits. Additionally, scientific research on 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, promote 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 (Affective and somatic pathways in music-centered therapeutic practice)** explores the therapeutic potential of music by focusing on its affective, sensory, and somatic dimensions. Participants will examine how embodied listening fosters emotional resonance and non-verbal attunement, engaging both the body and affective systems in the therapeutic process. Through theoretical insights and experiential activities, the module addresses how music can support emotion regulation, reduce anxiety, and activate self-soothing mechanisms. Emphasis is placed on non-verbal and symbolic meaning-making processes, highlighting music as a medium for expression when words are insufficient or unavailable. Drawing from interdisciplinary perspectives, including music therapy, affective neuroscience, and body-oriented psychotherapy, this module offers both



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conceptual frameworks and practical tools for integrating music-centered approaches in clinical and educational settings.

- **Module 3 (Theory and techniques of relaxation and body-oriented meditation in clinical practice)** introduces key relaxation and body-based meditation techniques through theoretical presentations and critical analysis of their effectiveness as supported by scientific literature. It covers deep relaxation methods and somatic approaches such as progressive muscle relaxation and anxiety management strategies. Cognitive techniques, including autogenic training, guided imagery, and the safe place technique, are also explored. Special attention is given to breathing techniques, including foundational and abdominal breathing, with a focus on their physiological and psychological effects.

The module further provides a comprehensive overview of meditation, examining its aims, its role in fostering self-awareness, and the distinctions between meditation and contemplation. It explores the principles and theoretical underpinnings of mindfulness, supported by practical exercises, and discusses both formal and informal mindfulness practices. The physiological mechanisms and empirically supported benefits of mindfulness on psychological well-being are also addressed.

Method of teaching

The course will combine theoretical lectures, practical exercises, group work, and firsthand experience with various techniques. Each module will feature detailed presentations on foundational concepts, scientific literature, and clinical applications of mind-body techniques. Guided sessions will enable students to practice techniques covered in the lectures, such as relaxation methods, mindfulness practices, and breathing exercises. Collaborative projects and discussions will encourage students to explore and apply these techniques in a supportive environment, fostering peer learning and the exchange of diverse perspectives. Additionally, students will have the opportunity to personally experience the techniques through guided practices and, for those interested, lead sessions under supervision. This comprehensive approach ensures that students gain not only a solid understanding of the theoretical aspects of mind-body techniques but also practical skills and experiential knowledge, equipping them for effective clinical application.

Course requirements

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

Grading

Final discussion: 3/3 of final grade



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Course readings and materials

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

Instructor 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.

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Cesare Cavallera, Psy.D. and Ph.D., is a Researcher of Clinical Psychology at the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milan. As psychologist and psychotherapist, he spent ten years researching the relation between unpleasant emotions (such as shame and guilt) and psychological symptoms. He has been a Visiting Professor at the Universidad de Monterrey (Mexico). He is the author of over 50 scientific contributions in international journals.

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Francesca Grosso, Psy.D. and Ph.D., is a psychologist and Research Fellow at Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milan, specializing in the mind-body connection, placebo/nocebo effects, and mindfulness-based interventions. As a Junior Adjunct Professor and Teaching Assistant, she contributes to courses on research methods and clinical psychology. She has published in peer-reviewed journals and book chapters on mindfulness and transcultural clinical practices. Francesca's professional goal is to translate research into practical methods to enhance well-being, with a focus on female health and psychological resilience.

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Chiara Rossi, Psy.D. and Ph.D., is a Psychologist, Psychodynamic psychotherapist, and Postdoctoral Research Fellow at Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore in Milan. Her research focuses on the clinical applications of music therapy, particularly the relationship between musical preferences and personality traits, the effects of music-based interventions on elderly populations, and the integration of music therapy within immersive Virtual Reality environments. She also explores the intersection of psychodynamic psychotherapy and new technologies (Virtual reality and artificial intelligence) in early interventions for personality disorders and adolescent mental health. Chiara teaches in academic programs on dynamic psychology and clinical methods. She has published in peer-reviewed journals and book chapters on psychodynamics and clinical practices.

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Course Schedule

Lesson	Date	Topic	Main Reading/Course Material
MODULE ONE. The speaking body			
1.	6 July 2026	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduction and sharing expectations • Emotions and body • Emotions and health 	<u>Recommended Reading</u> Langer, E. (2023). <i>The mindful body: Thinking our way to lasting health</i> . Little, Brown Book Group
2.	7 July 2026	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Life and health events • Clinical analysis of somatic diseases 	Materials will be uploaded on Blackboard
	9 July 2026	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Body scan meditation • Breathing techniques 	Materials will be uploaded on Blackboard
MODULE TWO. Affective and somatic pathways in music-centered therapeutic practice			
3.	10 July 2026	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Embodied listening: explore the sensory, affective, and somatic dimensions of music therapy. • Affective regulation through sound: the role of music in modulating emotions, reducing anxiety, and activating self-soothing mechanisms. • Symbolic and non-verbal meaning-making 	Materials will be uploaded on Blackboard
MODULE THREE. Theory and techniques of relaxation and body-oriented meditation in clinical practice			
4.	13 July 2025	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduction to relaxation techniques • Theoretical overview and analysis of effectiveness from the literature • Conscious activation exercises • Mental training and imagery 	Materials will be uploaded on Blackboard
5.	14 July 2025	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Autogenic training • Safe place technique • Visualization techniques 	Materials will be uploaded on Blackboard
6.	15 July 2026	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Basic breathing and abdominal breathing • Biofeedback • Overview and theory of breathing techniques 	Materials will be uploaded on Blackboard
7.	16 July	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduction to Mindfulness and 	<u>Required Reading</u>



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	2026	<p>contemplation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Principles and theories of mindfulness, with practical exercises • Formal and informal practice 	<p>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.</p> <p>Kabat-Zinn, J. (2013). <i>Mindfulness for beginners: Reclaiming the present moment - and your life</i>. Sounds True.</p> <p><u>Required Reading</u></p> <p>Stahl, B., & Goldstein, E. (2010). <i>The mindfulness-based stress reduction workbook</i>. New Harbinger Publications.</p>
8.	17 July 2025	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discussion of the experience and group supervision, with the possibility of discussing clinical cases • Final presentation of the project work 	