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

PROF. FRANCESCO PAGNINI

Area of study:	Psychology
Area Code:	CLPS510
Credits:	6 ECTS
Dates	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 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 (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.

Prerequisites



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

Method of instruction

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

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

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 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.

Course Schedule

Lesson	Date	Topic	Main Reading/Course Material
MODULE ONE. The speaking body			



1.	7 July 2025	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emotions and body • Emotions e and health • Motivational systems and emotional reactions 	<u>Recommended Reading</u> 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"> • Life and health events • Clinical analysis of somatic diseases 	Materials will be uploaded on Blackboard
3.	9 July 2025	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Theoretical introduction to the placebo effect • Nocebo and risk factors • The new open-label placebo paradigm • Presentation of empirical research 	<u>Recommended Reading</u> Bernstein, M. H., Blease, C., Locher, C., & Brown, W. A. (2019). <i>The nocebo effect: When words make you sick</i> . Springer. Howick, J. (2023). <i>The power of placebos</i> . Johns Hopkins University Press. Miller, F. G., Colloca, L., Crouch, R. A., & Kaptchuk, T. J. (Eds.). (2013). <i>The placebo: A reader</i> . Johns Hopkins University Press.
MODULE 2. Theory and technique of relaxation			
4.	10 July 2025	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduction to relaxation techniques • Theoretical overview and analysis of effectiveness from the literature Conscious-emotional activation exercises • Muscle tension reduction for anxiety management: techniques and exercises 	Materials will be uploaded on Blackboard
5.	11 July 2025	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Autogenic training • Safe place technique • Visualization techniques 	Materials will be uploaded on Blackboard
6.	12 July 2025	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Basic breathing and abdominal breathing • Biofeedback • Overview and theory of breathing techniques 	Materials will be uploaded on Blackboard
MODULE THREE. Body meditation techniques in clinical practice			
7.	13 July 2025	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduction to mindfulness: what it is and what it is for • Mindfulness and contemplation 	<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.



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			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"> Principles and theories of mindfulness, with practical exercises Formal and informal practice 	<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"> Mental training and imagery Body scan meditation Breathing techniques 	Materials will be uploaded on Blackboard
10.	16 July 2025	Discussion of the experience and group supervision, with the possibility of discussing clinical cases	
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, Psy.D. and Ph.D. Candidate, is a psychologist and researcher 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.

Cesare Cavalera, 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.

Giacomo A. Minazzi, Ph.D Candidate, Research Fellow of Clinical Psychology at the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milan. As a psychologist he spent more than five years working in psychiatric residential



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communities and currently is Clinical Manager of one. His research interests focus on psychoanalysis and group rehabilitative activities in the psychiatric field.

Valentina Poletti, is a PhD student in Clinical Psychology at Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milan. As a psychologist and emerging researcher, her work focuses on illness perceptions and their influence on clinical outcomes in chronic diseases, with a particular emphasis on sleep disorders and respiratory illnesses. She has been a Visiting Research Fellow at the Neurocenter of Southern Switzerland and has contributed to several publications in peer-reviewed international journals.