

Mindfulness:

The practice of "being here now"



By Tamara Mitchell

Mindfulness is the practice of focusing your attention on the moment and, without judgment, observing all aspects of the world around you as well as your thoughts, feelings and reactions.^{1, 2} It is also called being aware.² Though this sounds so simple, it's actually completely different from the way most of us live our lives. It is in stark contrast to being absent-minded or being overwhelmed by thoughts of what we need to do, what happened in our past, or what we should have done. We become anxious and afraid and we feel like life is slipping away. We are busy making plans for the future without awareness of the present. We hurry and worry and we're afraid to slow down. By living this way, we miss the actual life we are living. We also increase our risk of illness and injury.

Mindfulness meditation, or *vipassana*, is a Buddhist tradition developed 2,500 years ago to help people live each moment of their lives, even the painful ones, as fully as possible.³ It has been used to reconnect the mind and the body, particularly by such leaders in the field as Jon Kabat-Zinn at the Stress Reduction Clinic of the University of Massachusetts Medical Center founded in 1979.⁴ Eckhart Tolle, a world-class spiritual leader, also teaches these methods of focusing on the present.¹ Mindfulness is used as both a meditation and a practice in everyday life. Practicing mindfulness can be beneficial to people with a very wide range of serious (or not so serious) illnesses, and in dealing with stress, panic attacks, and emotional pain. In fact, it can be used by anyone to simply enrich life, to expand the capacity to live and love, to deal with life's ups and downs in a clear and calm manner, and to reduce physical pain.

Health, Stress, and Mindfulness

In just eight weeks of training in mindfulness and mindfulness meditation, studies show that the brain and the way it processes emotion under stress can be changed.² At the end of eight weeks, the immune system is more robust, people feel calmer, and they feel more comfortable with their bodies.² Their risk of injury is dramatically reduced.

Stress is a total mind/body response to a perceived threat. Much stress comes from imagined threats. When we begin to pay attention not to our thoughts or ideas about things, but to life as it really is, we are able to pay attention to the actual threats and dispel our fears. By being mindful, we are alert to what is really happening and we can act clearly and wisely to the real threats.¹

The stress reaction involves the endocrine and central nervous systems that release stress-causing chemicals into our bodies.⁵ Since life is full of turbulence, we are often in a state of constant stress that results in such physical problems as high blood pressure, depression, headaches, backaches, and insomnia.⁵ Stress measurably causes disorders of the musculoskeletal, cardiovascular, nervous, gastrointestinal and immune systems.⁵

Rigid thinking and behaviors that might have once kept us safe become our enemies when our world view is challenged. To cope with mental discomfort, many people become busier or they develop unhealthy practices involving food, sex, drugs, or alcohol.⁵ Stress not only undermines the health of our minds and our bodies and can potentially kill us, but it also robs us of the quality of life.⁵

Mindfulness can help you, especially if:

- your life's journey is no longer an adventure but an obsessive need to arrive, to attain, and to "make it."
- you no longer see or smell the flowers by the wayside, nor are you aware of the beauty of life as it unfolds around you.
- you are always trying to be somewhere other than where you are.
- what you are doing is a means to an end.
- you are waiting for fulfillment from something or someone in the future.

In this article, we will define some of the principles of mindfulness, how to develop it, and how to apply it to various aspects of your life.

“Be the silent watcher of your thoughts and behavior. You are beneath the thinker. You are the stillness beneath the mental noise. You are the love and joy beneath the pain.” Eckhart Tolle

The principles of Mindfulness

There are two parts to mindfulness practice: mindfulness meditation and mindfulness in everyday life. Both are important and necessary to achieve the fullest benefits of mindfulness.³

Mindfulness meditation is very different from transcendental meditation or other similar practices where you focus attention on one thing and exclude all other thoughts and distractions.³ Those practices can result in very deep states of calmness. Mindfulness meditation begins by focusing to create calmness and stability, but then it goes beyond that state to one of focused attention. Rather than ignoring or suppressing thoughts that come into the mind, thoughts are noted and observed intentionally without judgment, moment by moment, as events in the field of awareness.³ CDs and online meditations or downloads are listed in the “Resources” section.

Mindfulness meditation today is not usually a religious practice, but since Buddhists originally developed it, there are vipassana meditation centers with a Buddhist emphasis. For example, The Insight Meditation Center in Redwood City is devoted to classes, yoga, retreats, and mindfulness meditation. In the Washington, D.C. area, the Washington Mindfulness Community sponsors numerous activities, events and a newsletter. Both are listed in the “Resources” section below.

For those who are very busy people, mindfulness meditation requires discipline because it involves taking time each day to do exercises which will strengthen the capability to be mindful in everyday life. We encourage you to try mindfulness meditation for just eight weeks and overall awareness, quality of life, and health will be improved.²

Mindfulness in everyday life is simply moment-to-moment awareness. All it requires is shifting from auto-pilot to awareness at any time.³ Learn to be the witness of your thoughts and emotions. Become aware of the background "static" of ordinary unconsciousness and how rarely you are at ease within yourself.¹ By observing your emotions during the ups and downs of life, you learn to surf the waves. Beneath the surface of the waves is the calmness, strength, and energy of the universe, which will stabilize everything in your life.

Examples of everyday mindfulness include:

- While brushing your teeth, feel the stimulation of the brush on your gums, the taste and smell of the toothpaste and the coolness of the water when you rinse your mouth.
- When eating, feel the texture of the food in your mouth and the various flavors and aromas. Do not think about other things or talk, and don't think about your next bite until you have savored the current one completely.
- When talking with someone, really listen and hear what they are saying without judging them, thinking of other things, or planning what you want to say next.

Practicing Mindfulness

Each second of life should be savored. Even everyday chores and tasks can be very enjoyable if you pay attention to the little details that make things special. Be deliberate in your actions, make note of things that arouse your senses such as the warmth of the water while you're doing dishes, the details of your furniture while cleaning, the scent of the soap while you shower.⁶

Mindfulness requires withdrawing attention from the past and the future whenever they are not needed. Your mind tends to escape the present into the future and the past. Both are illusory.¹ The future is either imagined to be better or worse than the present. Your past is a history of good and bad experiences which can color the present moment.¹ To be free of time is to be free of the psychological need of the past for your identity and the future for your fulfillment.¹ Do you talk and think frequently about the past? If so, you are not living in the present. Your past and your future are not you, right now.¹ By not dragging the past into every moment, it gives you back the moment in which you live.

When focusing on the present, be aware of time only as it is needed to accomplish goals. If you set a goal and work toward it, you are peripherally aware of time, but your focus is on the present. If you set a goal and focus on the goal, the present is just a stepping-stone to the future and the present loses its intrinsic value.¹ The stepping stones are the focus of the present.

Dealing with Reactions, Thoughts and Emotions

Life has cycles of good and bad. When we practice mindfulness, at the time something makes us upset, hurt, or angry, we stop immediately to observe the moment.^{1,2} We become the witness of the circumstances and become aware of our reactions. By looking at things in a non-judgmental way, we take the power away from the situation and do not let it feed our emotions. For example, if you get cut off in traffic, rather than reciprocating with road rage, simply watch the car cut you off, feel your anger, and wait to see what happens next. By surfing the emotion and watching without judgment, the anger will hit a peak and then dissolve.²

“Surrender” is the simple but profound wisdom of yielding to, rather than opposing the flow of, life. Accept the present moment. By accepting the situation and taking positive action, we are more effective than resisting the situation and taking negative or no action.¹ In bad or intolerable situations, we can see clearly the course of action, or when nothing can be done, we can plan.¹ But planning must not consist of projecting into the future and running "mental movies" that cause us to lose sight of the present.¹ If we cannot take any action or cannot remove ourselves from the situation, we must go deeper into surrender, without giving up. There must never be any resistance to reality. By going more deeply into the present, change often comes about with little or no action at all.¹

Negativity is inner resistance.¹ Negativity cannot change reality; it stops desirable conditions from happening. We must acknowledge the negativity and inner resistance and try to drop it.

Mental and physical tension arises when there is resistance. The free flow of energy through our body is restricted and our health suffers. We create our own problems and pain with this negativity. If we can't drop it, we must either focus our attention on it, or become transparent to allow whatever is annoying us to pass through us. Instead of reacting with defense or attack, offer no resistance. This doesn't mean you become a doormat to the bad behavior of others or accept situations that are not tolerable, but it means they lose their power over you.¹ You simply do not accept the insults or rudeness of others into your realm. It passes over you or deflects back to them, but it doesn't affect you.^{7,8}

Dealing with Problems

Many problems are burdens we carry around in our mind. We imagine things that may (or may never) happen in the future. When we are full of past and future problems there is no room for new solutions.¹ We can choose to eliminate this burden by focusing on the one thing we can do immediately.¹

Waiting

There are two types of waiting:

- 1) Small-scale waiting involves such things as traffic jams or the line at the grocery store or airport. These are a great opportunities for mindfulness, where we can observe the things and people around us and our own emotions rather than getting impatient and wishing we weren't waiting. The reality is, we are waiting and we must wait.
- 2) Large-scale waiting is waiting for the next vacation, a bigger house, a meaningful relationship, success, retirement, or our next raise. Some people spend their whole life waiting because they want the future, not the present.

True prosperity is fully accepting our present reality and being grateful for what we have.¹

Dealing with past emotional pain

When we are not mindful of the present, every emotional pain that we have experienced leaves behind a residue that lives on in us.¹ This accumulated pain is negative energy that occupies our body and mind. It can be dormant or it can be active. In very unhappy people, this past emotional pain is active up to 100% of the time so that they live entirely in pain. Other people may only experience past emotional pain in certain circumstances, relationships, or when it is activated by an innocent remark or a thought.¹ These emotional pains can result in negative, vicious, or self-destructive thoughts, behaviors or feelings. It is best to catch the past emotional pain at the very moment it awakens from its dormant state and feel its energy; be completely aware of it. By doing this, the pain cannot control us. If we identify with it, it can take over us, become part of us, and live through us.¹ If we have closely identified with this emotional pain for most or part of our lives, we will feel resistance to watch it. We have an unconscious fear that we will lose our identity because a large part of our sense of self is invested in it. Don't fight the emotional pain. Just watch it and accept it as what it is in the moment.¹

People seeking salvation in the future are trying to escape some pain. If they focus on the present, they encounter their own pain, which they fear. By doing this, the pain dissolves into the past.¹

Dealing with painful relationships

When we experience painful emotions in a relationship, we usually perceive our partner to be the cause of those feelings. We project our feelings outward and attack the other person. People rely on unhealthy lifestyles and habits such as drugs, food, codependent relationships, or alcohol to cover up their own emotional pain. When these things are not available or when they stop

working, the pain is uncovered. Other people do not cause our pain and unhappiness. We allow it to happen. We must face the pain that is in us rather than trying to escape it or blaming others. Only then will our pain dissolve into the past.¹ The way to deal with lack of closeness or dwelling on the imperfections in others is to commit to loving-kindness for the other person every day. Begin practicing compassion for the other person and explore how you can be fully accepting of that person just as they are.⁹ Clearly, if you are in danger of physical harm, this is not appropriate, but for everyday disagreements or negative self-talk about another person, this is a productive way to change, not only your own perception of them, but to most likely change the dynamics of the relationship as well.

Dealing with illness and physical pain

Illness and physical pain are part of one's life situation. It is recommended not to label illness because that gives it reality, solidity, and continuity in time (i.e., a past and a future).¹

By confronting pain and illness, even death, only in the present, it is reduced to one or several of these factors: physical pain, weakness, discomfort, or disability. Surrender to these factors, not to the idea of illness.¹ We must not blame ourselves, feel guilty, or blame life for its unfairness.¹ All of that is resistance. If we become seriously ill and feel angry at these suggestions, it is an indication that the illness has become part of our sense of self and that we are protecting our identity and the illness.¹ Our illnesses have nothing to do with who we truly are.¹

Surrender to the moment and it will transform you. Fear and pain will not necessarily be transformed into happiness, but they will be changed into a deep acceptance that surpasses simple emotions.

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This article and all of our articles are intended for your information and education. We are not experts in the diagnosis and treatment of specific medical or mental problems. When dealing with a severe problem, please consult with a healthcare or mental health professional and research the alternatives available for your particular diagnosis prior to embarking on a treatment plan. You are ultimately responsible for your own health and treatment!

RESOURCES

Note: There are many resources and guided meditations available online and on YouTube. Search for "Mindfulness Meditation".

Online mindfulness meditation courses, CD's and MP3 downloads:

<http://shop.wildmind.org/home.php>

Insight Meditation Center

<http://www.insightmeditationcenter.org/>

1205 Hopkins Avenue
Redwood City, California 94062
(650) 599-3456

Washington Mindfulness Community

<http://www.mindfulnessdc.org/>

PO Box 11168
Takoma Park, MD 20913.

(301) 681-1036

Sunday night meditations:

5017 16th St. NW, Washington DC (between Farragut and Gallatin Streets).

call (202) 723-0773 for directions between 9 am and 7 pm e.s.t

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