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What is Mindfulness?

There are many reasons why we may find life difficult at times, and these difficulties impact on us in all kinds of ways. Mindfulness is an unusually simple way of engaging with this, whatever the impact may be. It can help us to relate differently, and with compassion, to the different kinds of pain and struggles that life's difficulties may bring. Mindfulness can help us to be less reactive to whatever is happening in the moment, enabling us to relate to our experiences, whether they may be pleasant, unpleasant or simply neutral, in a way that can reduce levels of pain and help foster a sense of wellbeing.

Do you recognize any of these experiences?

- Feeling preoccupied with concerns about the future
- Reflecting a lot about the past
- Rushing through activities without being attentive to them
- Failing to notice some feelings of physical tension or discomfort
- Being inattentive to what you are doing with the result that you become clumsy

These can be signs that you are not being mindful.

“Mindfulness, in contrast, focuses our attention on the task in hand. When we are mindful, our attention is not entangled in past or future, and we are not judging or rejecting what is occurring in the moment. We are present. This kind of attention generates energy, clear-headedness, and joy. Fortunately it is a skill that can be cultivated by anyone.” (Germer et al, 2005, p.5)

Some misconceptions about mindfulness

1. Is it about emptying your mind?

This is *not* the aim or reality of mindful practice. Indeed, if you try to empty your mind you will discover that is almost impossible! It is completely normal and natural for your mind to wander. We are constantly distracted. Becoming *aware* of these distractions is the art of mindfulness.

Mindfulness is:

“...paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally”

Kabat-Zinn (2004)

2. Will mindfulness make everything better?

Mindfulness is *not* about taking away the pain or discomfort. It is neither about dwelling in the discomfort nor denying it, but rather changing your relationship with it. It is about withstanding the ups and downs of your emotions through acceptance of yourself.

3. Is Mindfulness another relaxation technique?

Mindfulness practice is much more than relaxation. It is about increasing awareness, wisdom and freedom from automatic ways of responding and being. A very useful additional factor, as a by-product of paying attention moment-to-moment, is that you may *also* become more relaxed and calm!

How do I practice being Mindful?

Formal Practice

This usually involves spending a specific amount of time each day in meditation, bringing awareness to our body and breathing, perhaps through a bodyscan, mindful movement or sitting meditation. As Jon Kabat-Zinn points out “Mindfulness Practice is simple but not easy”, it requires patience and commitment. Meditation will feel good some days and no so good on others; nonetheless it is all meditation. Thoughts, feelings and sensations may be pleasant, unpleasant or neutral, but whatever they are, they are ok. Mindfulness is about bringing awareness to all feelings, thoughts or bodily sensations, and gently allowing them to pass without judgment or blame, each time returning to your breathing ‘core’. It involves a constant process of seeing and letting be, seeing and letting go.

Informal Practice

This is about trying to establish a new habit of being mindful during everyday activities. You can start with some short practices such as each time you wash your hands or brush your teeth. If your mind wanders, just gently bring it back to the washing or brushing. Gradually you can extend your practice to longer activities, such as taking a shower, going for a walk or listening to some music. Whatever you are doing, just try to notice what is there rather than getting caught up in your thoughts.



“You can’t stop the waves, but you can learn to surf.”

Jon Kabat-Zinn

Seven 'pillars' of Mindfulness (as described by Jon Kabat-Zinn)

- **Non-judging**

"Mindfulness is cultivated by assuming the stance of an impartial witness to your own experience" (Kabat-Zinn). We spend much of our time judging our mental experiences as either good, bad or neutral. When you start meditating, you might, for example, hear your mind saying 'this is boring' or 'this isn't working'. These are judgments; wherever possible, recognize and suspend any judgments and just watch whatever comes into the mind as if an impartial witness.

- **Patience**

We live much of our lives trying to get somewhere else or feel something different. As your mindful practice develops, you can begin to be more patient with whatever comes into your mind. This can be particularly useful when you feel agitated. Thoughts can begin to overwhelm you as you get carried away with the travels of your mind. Practicing patience can help you stay in the moment and you can begin to be more open and accepting of the fullness of each moment as it unfolds before you.

- **Beginners Mind**

The beginner's mind reminds us that each moment is unique. No moment has ever been experienced before or will be again. As you begin to see each moment with fresh eyes it can open you to new and unique experiences.

- **Trust**

Rather than look outwards for answers, begin to trust in your own intuition and authority even if at times this involves making mistakes. The more you can begin to trust in your own authority, the more you take responsibility for your own life and the easier it will be to be able to trust in others.

- **Non-striving**

The goal of being mindful is just to be yourself. It has no other goal, you are not trying to be someone or something different. Of course, in reality, you already are yourself, it is just that we rarely embrace this. Most of the time we want to be somewhere else or to be something different. If only I were ... happier...less lonely...more intelligent.... Rather than getting caught up in these judgments and a desire to change, just observe the activity of your judging mind, allow everything and anything you experience, from moment to moment, to be here, intentionally cultivating an attitude of non-striving.

- **Acceptance**

Acceptance is about coming to terms with things as they are now. If you can begin to develop this acceptance of who you are, then you are in a better position to change; you are in a better position to allow healing to take place. If you wait for something to be different before you accept who you are, you might wait forever. If you are feeling sad and lonely then that is what you are feeling at this moment; if you are feeling anxious then that is what you are feeling. This does not mean that you have to resign yourself to staying like this. Acceptance is a willingness to see things as they are, thus enabling you to act appropriately in your life, responding to, rather than reacting to the way things are.

- **Letting Go**

There are certain thoughts and feelings that your mind wants to hold on to. If they are pleasant you try to prolong them. If they are not, you try to get rid of them, wanting to avoid them, because they are unpleasant, painful and frightening. Let your experience be what it is, whatever that is. Practice observing from moment to moment. Letting go is a way of letting things be – of accepting things as they are. If you find it particularly hard to let go then focus on the opposite and observe what it feels like to hold on. You let go when you go to sleep – if you can't let go – you can't sleep. Practice letting go when you are awake.



*“The most precious gift we can offer others is our presence.
When mindfulness embraces those we love, they will bloom
like flowers.”*

Thich Nhat Hanh