

An Introduction to Mindfulness

Mindfulness is the foundation of an ancient Buddhist practice known as Vipassana, or insight meditation. Western medicine is now recognizing it as a tool for dealing with stress, chronic pain, and other medical and psychological conditions.

Fortune 500 companies provide mindfulness instruction to their employees to reduce on-the-job stress, doctors and therapists refer patients to courses in Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) to develop skills to cope with physical and emotional pain, and schools are using mindfulness practices to help students succeed.

What is mindfulness?

Mindfulness is best described as the practice of being more aware in the present moment. It involves finding, developing and sustaining present moment awareness.

This bare awareness includes paying attention to everything that exists in the present moment – your breathing, the thoughts passing through your mind, the sounds around you – and also understanding the constantly changing nature of the present moment.

Mindfulness is “awareness that is not thinking.” Rather, it is being aware of and concentrating attention on your thoughts and the sensations your body is experiencing in an open and non-judgmental way.

Examples of mindfulness practice include:

- Becoming aware of breath and feeling the stomach rise and fall with each breath
- Feeling the various physical sensations of an emotion
- Noticing thoughts as they pass through the mind
- Paying attention to all of the sounds in a room
- Noticing what happens in the body when there is stress
- Watching the thoughts that arise when there is boredom.

Benefits of Mindfulness

Research has found that people who practice mindfulness can experience:

- An increase in emotional regulation
- Improved social skills
- An enhanced ability to orient attention
- Improved working memory
- Improved planning and organizational skills
- An increase in self-esteem
- A sense of calmness, relaxation and self-acceptance
- A better quality of sleep
- A decrease in depression
- A decrease in overall anxiety and test anxiety
- A decrease in ADHD behaviors – specifically, hyperactivity and impulsivity
- A decline in negative emotions
- Fewer conduct and anger management problems.

Research on Mindfulness

Current research shows the potential for mindfulness to affect the structure and neural patterns present in the brain. Scientists have seen these results last not only during mindfulness practice, but also during the daily life of practitioners. Thicker cortical regions related to attention and sensory processing have been found in long-term meditation practitioners compared with non-meditators.

Studies have also found a correlation between mindfulness practice in couples and an enhanced relationship, as well as the benefits of mindfulness on familial relationships.

In children and adolescents, studies have proven that mindfulness can improve academic functioning, decrease symptoms of overall anxiety and test anxiety, decrease aggressive behavior, increase attention, improve social skills, enhance sleep patterns, and instill an overall sense of calm.

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