

Mindfulness for Health and Wellbeing

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Mindfulness is often defined as intentionally focusing one's attention on the experience occurring at the present moment in a non-judging or accepting way (Kabat-Zinn, 1990). Mindfulness is contrasted against the type of mental activity that takes your attention away from the present moment such as a preoccupation with memories, catastrophising, awfulising, worries, what-if-ing, revenge, resentment, entitlement, perfectionism, criticism, denial, blame, etc (Baer, 2006, p.5). These types of non-mindful mental activities are pure and simple, head-chatter.

The definition of Mindfulness implies that it consists of two parts. The first part is about your ability to focus your attention. Everyone can do this. As a matter of fact your ability to focus your attention is fundamental to your survival as much as it is fundamental to your health and wellbeing. You can choose to focus your attention on the present moment or you can choose to focus it elsewhere.

The second part of Mindfulness is your attitude. It is not just a matter of focusing your attention in the present moment. Mindfulness also requires a certain non-judgemental and accepting attitude. In other words, you become an impartial witness to your own experience, stimuli, and mental activity. Another way of saying this is that you observe and assess with curiosity your own experience, stimuli, and mental activity. Everyone is capable of taking on useful attitudes as much as we are capable of holding on to unhelpful attitudes.

Mindfulness comes from over 5,000 years of Buddhist tradition and teaching. Buddhism can be seen from four points of view. Firstly, at the most basic level it can be seen as a mind-theory; secondly it offers skills for stress-reduction; thirdly, it represents a world-view; finally, it is seen as a spiritual path.

Modern psychology is interested in mind-theories; therefore there is no surprise that psychologists have an interest in Mindfulness. More so from a stress-reduction point of view, Mindfulness offers many practical skills for psychologists to pass on to their clients.

The skills of Mindfulness stand alone for their usefulness. To benefit from Mindfulness it is not necessary to change your world-view or follow a spiritual path. People successfully use Mindfulness skills to overcome psychological problems such as depression, anxiety, panic, and to assist with pain management, as well as anger management and basic stress-reduction. People also use these skills to maintain their health and wellbeing, and performance levels.

Mindfulness comes from the Eastern meditation traditions. The word "meditation" in this context might either interest you or put you off, depending on your understanding of the word. From a mindfulness perspective, meditation is not the endpoint. It is instead a means of practising the Mindfulness skills. It's all about developing the skills; it is not all about the meditation.

Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that it is possible to develop Mindfulness skills without meditating. Yes, this is true. Or if you wish, there are various types of Mindfulness meditations for you to choose from.

Mindfulness meditation differs from most Eastern concentration-based meditations where the focus is on one stimulus such as a word, or syllable, or mantra, or sound, or object, or sensation. One example of a concentration-based meditation is Transcendental Meditation (TM) where the focus is solely upon one's personal mantra which is a sound something like "oum" or "one". Also with concentration-based meditations often there is an agenda to achieve an altered state of

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consciousness which could otherwise be described as dissociation or trance-state. Trance-states are often associated with a spiritual connectedness, as an example (Benson, 1983).

Mindfulness, on the other hand is all about you developing and maintaining your curiosity and interest in your experience, stimuli, and mental activity, as it happens, in the present moment. There are no altered states, dissociation or trance-states to achieve. Such altered-states would rob you of the opportunity to observe your mind's activity. If your mind wanders off into head-chatter during meditation, then this is a valid event to observe with interest. Such an observation would then give you the opportunity to bring your focus back to the present moment.

The idea that Mindfulness meditation is not to create an altered state implies that relaxation is not important for the meditation. This is true, although, achieving relaxation during the meditation could help you to focus. The point of Mindfulness meditation is not so much to create relaxation. If you do achieve relaxation during a Mindfulness meditation, then this would be a beneficial side-effect. Stress-reduction does not come from relaxation. As a matter of fact there is a phenomenon called Relaxation Induced Anxiety (Wegner, Broome, & Blumberg, 1996).

There are two levels of Mindfulness skill. The basic level is practised as a concentration-based meditation. During the meditation you focus your attention on your breath. This is to practise the skill of focusing your attention in the present moment. Your breath, as well as your physical presence, is always in the present moment. Where else could you be physically. The problem is that you could always be elsewhere mentally.

So as you focus on your breath during meditation eventually your mind is likely to wander off into head-chatter. When this happens, all you need to do is to notice that your mind has wandered and then to bring your focus back to your breath. These are the skills of Noticing and Focusing. Noticing what? That your mind has wandered off from the present moment. Focus where? Focus on your breath because it is in the present moment.

The daily practise of the Two Minute Breathing Meditation is sufficient to develop the skills of Noticing and Focusing. How long do you think that you would need to practise every day? Well, it's the Two Minute Breathing Meditation, so about two minutes would be enough, so long as you do it every day until you have the skill. How will I know that I've got the skill; when Noticing and Focusing is as natural as breathing that is when? If you have time to breathe each day then you have time for noticing and focusing.

The point of developing the noticing and focusing skills is that you continue to do it throughout your waking hours. Meditation is not the point of Mindfulness. The skills are the point. If you are able to develop the noticing and focusing skills without meditation, then meditation is not at all necessary. It is up to you how you develop the skills. The point is that Mindfulness is what you do during your conscious hours, not what you do just during meditation.

The skills that you develop during the meditation must translate into your everyday life. This is why I suggest the Two Minute Breathing Meditation. For one thing it only takes two minutes to practise each day, but not only that, the noticing and focusing are skills that you can do with your eyes open. You practise with your eyes closed because it's easier to do it that way. When you get good at it you can do it with your eyes open. You can even do it whilst you drive your car. As I said earlier, if you have time to breathe during the day, then you have time for noticing and focusing.

For those of you who already have some knowledge of Mindfulness, you would be aware of other meditations such as the Walking or Eating Meditations. From a Buddhist point of view for following

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a spiritual path, these are excellent meditations, but I tend to steer away from them from a stress-reduction point of view. These other meditations are time consuming, require a big commitment, and they do not relate directly to the day-to-day practical skills needed for stress-reduction. Whereas, the Two Minute Breathing Meditation translates directly into daily life.

The more advanced level of Mindfulness is about expanding your focus of attention in the present moment to include observations of your body's sensations and experiences, your mental activity, and the tasks at hand. From the more advanced point of view, the breath is no longer the sole point of focus. The present moment is a rich source of information that directly relates to whether we suffer or thrive.

From a stress-reduction point of view, the more advanced level of Mindfulness is encapsulated in the ideas of Mental Fitness and Recovery-Rate. The ultimate aim for stress-reduction is to significantly reduce stress-symptoms in your life. Stress-reduction can only be achieved, in any kind of sustainable way, by resolving stressors in your life. This will be your ongoing life project. There will always be stressors. Stressors are life happening. Stress comes from unresolved stressors.

From the stress-reduction point of view there might be some terms here that you don't fully understand just yet. For example, I've just said in the previous paragraph that stress-reduction, or relief from stress symptoms, comes from resolving stressors. The word "stress" is often misused. The term "stress" denotes a list of symptoms such as sleep disturbance, irritability, anger, anxiety, panic, depression, alcohol and drug abuse, etc. Stressors on the other hand are demands, challenges, threats, danger, hassles, change, chronic pain or illness, etc. A stressor is anything that stimulates your autonomic nervous system to produce the emergency chemicals. This is explained under the heading of the Stress Model in Session One and further expanded in the in Session Three.

Stress-symptoms come from the emergency chemical, adrenalin and cortisol, if they remain in your body at elevated levels over an extended period of time. Head-chatter keeps the autonomic response alive in your body. There is head-chatter because you have unresolved stressors. Stressors are either internal or external.

Mindfulness needs to develop in stages from the basic level to the more advanced level. This progression should only take a matter of weeks. It all depends upon your interest, understanding, and practise. With Mindfulness there are three important "Ps". These are practise, practise, and practise.

Now there is just one final word about stressors from a Mindfulness point of view. Stressors come from two different directions. One is external and the other is internal. An external stressor is an event that impacts upon you and demands that you adapt in some way. An internal stressor, on the other hand, is in your personality.

Our personalities, at least in part, are defined by our conditioned responses to the world around us. These conditioned responses are based on fundamental belief that we use to make sense of the world and to respond to stimuli. An internal stressor is basically a belief at a fundamental level that doesn't work. The technical term is maladaptive cognitive schemas. Cognitive refers to mental activity. Schema implies a structure. Maladaptive means that it doesn't work. Internal stressors, defined as maladaptive cognitive schemas are belief systems that don't work.

This brings us back to a discussion about head-chatter. Head-chatter is due to unresolved stressors. Most likely the unresolved stressor will be internal. Most external stressors are obvious

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and they require an action or a plan for an action to resolve them. If we are not clearing our external stressors then this could be because our internal stressors are creating an invisible wall that blocks our progress.

In the more advance level of Mindfulness, from a stress-reduction point of view, the head-chatter is of particular interest. Head-chatter requires particular attention in a particular way. To put it in simple terms, unattended head-chatter will lead to stress-symptoms. Stress-reduction comes from resolving stressors. Attending to head-chatter Mindfully will lead you to the resolution of your stressors. Stressors are not resolved through meditation as a formal eyes-closed activity. For example, achieving relaxation does not resolve stressors.

The final word here is that more than likely, the majority of our head-chatter comes from internal stressors. Session Four is dedicated to a discussion on internal stressors. The tool for understanding internal stressors comes from Dr Jeffery Young's maladaptive cognitive schemas (Young, Klosko, & Weishaar, 2003). Therefore, an essential part of Mindfulness stress-reduction is to be able to identify internal stressors so as to resolve them, as they occur, in our daily lives, as an ongoing project.

Mindfulness is a lifetime project, in the same way that your health and wellbeing are a lifetime project. It is all about Mental Fitness and Recovery-Rate. We learn to drive the machine better.

References

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