

Life brings us difficult times, especially when we experience a painful disease. Many people would do most anything to avoid awareness of difficult things like having a smoke, a drink, eating to excess, or staying very busy. However, these are very temporary diversions that do not resolve problems and often make the situation worse. Mindfulness can help us nurture a calm awareness within a difficult situation and gain insight into how to handle pain and stress more resourcefully.

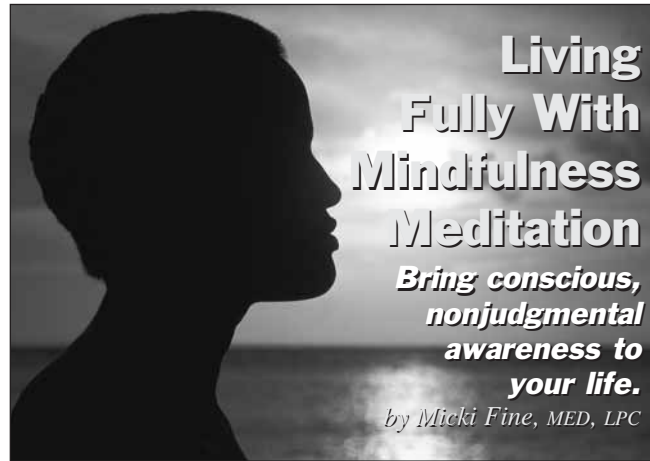
The skill of bringing calm, nonjudgmental awareness to our experience is developed through mindfulness meditation. Mindfulness meditation is practiced by consciously focusing one's attention on a single object: the breath. The focus of attention is eventually broadened to include observation of other aspects of one's present moment, ongoing experiences such as sounds, thoughts, or feelings. Many people think they cannot meditate because they cannot quiet their minds. Everyone has a wandering mind, and in mindfulness meditation, activity of the mind is considered part of the practice.

By applying nonjudgmental awareness to the activity of the mind and returning with gentle discipline to the breath, we begin to awaken from automatic thinking and become less attached to the stresses of "what-if" thinking. As we develop this non-reactive approach to our thoughts and feelings, we learn that we are not our thoughts, feelings or disease. We are no longer defined by our disease. Mindfulness is a process of growing from the automatic, unconscious reaction to a calm awareness of proactive choice, change and freedom.

Stress Reduction Tips

- * *Make ordinary, repetitive occasions such as the telephone ring or a stop light a reminder to notice your breath and activity of your mind for a few moments.*
- * *Make waiting in the doctor's office a time to turn inward and ask yourself "Am I awake now?"*
- * *When you're in a hurry, ask yourself, "Do I really need to hurry?"*
- * *Experiment with being compassionate and nonjudgmental with yourself when you are reminded of your limitations.*

The stillness that comes with mindfulness meditation fosters deep, physical relaxation and an opening of the heart. Through present moment, nonjudgmental awareness, the body and mind access internal healing resources and deep compassion.



The art of paying attention developed through meditation helps us to focus on the present moment while performing daily activities. As in meditation, we use the breath as a point of focus when cultivating awareness in daily life. For example, if you notice that you are not present to your experience, you can become mindful by focusing on your breath and then broadening that focus to other aspects of your experience. We use the breath because it is always with us; it connects us to our bodies and is the link between the body, the mind and vast internal resources.

While learning mindfulness meditation, I encourage people to be very gentle and patient with themselves and not to try too hard to relax (which is what most people think meditation is about). Mindfulness meditation is actually a nonstriving process in which we make time for "being" and "non-doing." This is difficult to grasp because our culture places so much value on doing more, having more and getting ahead. Patience and non-judgmental acceptance of oneself is important so we can begin to know that nothing else needs to happen for this moment to be complete.

Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) classes are based on the belief that we all have vast inner resources that can be mobilized to assist in stress, pain and symptom reduction.

Class members learn to identify and strengthen what is healthy for them. Participants learn mindfulness meditation and its practical applications for coping with stress and enhancing adaptive health behaviors. Most people who take the class report enjoying it

and that practicing mindfulness significantly improves their lives. Many class participants describe "waking up" and living for the first time.

Mindfulness classes are appropriate for people experiencing chronic pain, health problems,

stress related symptoms, or emotional concerns. It provides a powerful complement, not an alternative, to medical treatment and psychotherapy. Recent research shows that cancer survivors who participated in a mindfulness class reported fewer physical and emotional difficulties as compared to a control group.

MBSR was developed by Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn at the University of



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Massachusetts Medical Center. The Stress Reduction Clinic there has become one of the country's most successful stress reduction facilities. Dr. Kabat-Zinn's

work at the clinic was featured in Bill Moyers' PBS special "Healing and the Mind" and is the subject of the books *Full Catastrophe Living*, and *Wherever You Go, There You Are*.

Editor's Note: *Micki Fine, MED, LPC, is a psychotherapist in private practice at the Women's Wellness Center in Houston, Texas. She combines the practice of psychotherapy with teaching Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction.*

Action! *To find a mindfulness class in your area, visit www.MBSR.com.* ■