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MINDFULNESS AND DEALING WITH PAIN

PAIN . . . it's part of life. It may seem like a hard fact of life, that pain is a condition of human existence and that no one escapes it. It's also part of human nature to try to avoid pain. Ancient wisdom tells us that the mindful experience of pain, whether it be physical or emotional, is the beginning of the end of suffering. For those of you who rely on hard evidence, research at University of Massachusetts Medical Center supports this ancient wisdom by reporting that implementing a mindfulness practice can help reduce physical and emotional pain reduction.

QUOTE

“ . . . In any experience, even a painful one, we can find the end of suffering right in the heart of the moment. ” Sharon Salzberg

The idea that pain is inevitable may be difficult to admit. However, the acceptance of this truth (that pain is inevitable) can free us from the suffering and exhaustion we experience as we try to deny or avoid pain. Fostering mindfulness in your life helps you develop acceptance of whatever the moment brings, including pain. Mindfulness is about paying attention in the present moment and noticing and letting go of judgment. When you can accept pain as a natural part of life, you can relax a little, learn from your experience, and not feel so bad about feeling bad. Through continued mindfulness, we can even learn to embrace physical or emotional pain, not to wallow in it or be overwhelmed by it, but to fully open to the truth, ourselves and others.

After years of thinking that one should not feel pain, some people are comforted by the idea that it is natural. One day a client came to see me for her first visit. She related many sad and hurtful circumstances that were currently part of her life. During our session I commented several times that I could certainly understand her sadness. She never came back. I later heard

through an acquaintance that my client was so relieved that it was “normal” to feel sad that she decided she could accept and live through her sadness.

It is instinctual to avoid pain, however, unrealistic efforts to avoid pain are sometimes reinforced by our families and society. In many families, physical and/or emotional pain is not respected or handled with compassion. I have clients who, when they cried as children, were told, “If you don’t stop crying, I’ll give you something to cry about”. This example, along with countless others, teaches the child to be ashamed of her pain, to mistrust her own feelings or her parents, and to cut herself off from others and from her pain.

In society, the suggestion that we avoid pain, at all costs, takes many forms. We are educated to take a pill at the first sign of discomfort. We look to material possessions to “make us happy”. Often we mask symptoms when they may be trying to warn us of some deeper or more systemic problem.

Through our response to these experiences, we develop beliefs and behaviors that influence our reaction to pain. Sometimes we develop addictive or compulsive behaviors to hide the pain, like workaholism, alcoholism, etc. But addictions only work for a little while and then bring more pain. Bringing mindfulness to our experience of pain can help us uncover the beliefs and attitudes acquired over time, and free ourselves from the influence of those beliefs.

Our physical or emotional pain is influenced by the deep sense of compassion that blooms naturally out of our continued mindfulness. This well of compassion comes from the acceptance, letting go of judgment, patience and trust that are fostered as we practice. Through mindfulness practice we can open to our own pain as well as that of others, and experience the intimate connection that we have with ourselves and all other beings. This felt sense of interconnection lets us know that we are not alone in our suffering.

Some growth is accessible only through the mindful experience of pain and suffering. Nature presents us with an illustration of this. Diane Mariechild, in her book, *Open Mind: Women’s Daily Inspiration for Becoming Mindful*, describes a high desert location that had been ravaged by dangerous floods not long before she went there on retreat. After the floods there was a wild

profusion of flowers that colored the ground, perfumed the air, and brought butterflies to “delicately kiss the flowers”. The land was ablaze with flowers that had not bloomed in one hundred years. With mindfulness, we can foster patience with the floods of life, and embrace the storm as the land does. Similar to the flower, perfumed air, and butterflies, we can reap benefits of self-knowledge, compassion, and peace.

QUOTE -

“Finally the oyster knows itself to be not different from the pearl: soft flesh made precious in pain, all a jewel in God’s fiery sea.” Lynn Park

Sitting with pain during meditation can be a great teacher for us. Sharon Salzberg, in her book, *A Heart As Wide As The World*, tells a story about her early meditation experience. She began to realize that when she shifted her sitting position during a painful meditation, she was reacting as much to the thoughts about the pain as she was to the pain itself. She reported, “To what was actually a moderate degree of physical discomfort, I was adding a large degree of mental torment.” Through this experience, she realized her fear of pain, and in the realization was released from the fear. Then the pain subsided.

How do you experience physical or emotional pain? The next time you feel pain, sit quietly, connect with your breath, and notice your reactions to the pain. Do you have thoughts like “You shouldn’t feel this way”, or “Oh, no, I’m going to feel this bad forever”, or “I’m the only one who feels this bad”? Perhaps you feel frustrated, angry or fearful of the pain itself. Experiment with noticing pain in detail, placing your bare attention on sensations that make up pain such as tingling, burning, pulsing, or throbbing. When you notice critical thoughts or judgment, remind yourself to observe your experience and then refocus on the sensations.

You may notice that the pain shifts and changes over time. That pain, like everything else in life, changes. It is not permanent. This can help to alleviate the same kind of suffering that Ms. Salzberg experienced. With continued mindfulness, you may also notice that you develop the capacity to be compassionate toward your pain and that of others too.

Genuinely exploring pain allows us to be in direct, intimate contact with what we experience. Sharon Salzberg states that it is through this contact that “we discover our lives”. Out of this discovery, and with continued mindfulness, we can begin to make choices about how to deal with our pain in a more compassionate, meaningful, and direct way.

It is important to recognize that, even though your thoughts influence your pain, this does not mean that the pain you feel “is all in your head”. It is real. Getting appropriate medical or psychological treatment is important because physical and emotional pain is a signal that we need to take care of ourselves in some way.

QUOTES

“Life is filled with suffering, but it is also filled with many wonders, like the blue sky, the sunshine, the eyes of a baby. To suffer is not enough. We must also be in touch with the wonders of life.” Thich Nhat Hanh

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