

HELP YOURSELF START A MINDFULNESS PRACTICE

If you keep up with current health and wellness literature, it's likely that you have read something about mindfulness. It seems to be a hot topic in today's world but it is actually an ancient practice, grounded in wisdom. Mindfulness meditation stems from insight (vipassana) meditation and has been practiced for approximately 2500 years.

Perhaps you have identified with what you have read about mindfulness. Or maybe you identify with the need for mindfulness in your own life. You may have decided that a mindfulness practice would be good for you but don't quite know how to start.

A mindfulness practice consists of two components: the practice of mindfulness meditation and the process of paying nonjudgmental attention to our experience of daily activities. The distinction between these two components is artificial since both components are about awakening to and living in the moment. The distinction is used for the purpose of discussion.

Mindfulness meditation begins with taking time away from other daily activities to sit quietly and to practice bringing alert, nonjudgmental awareness to each moment. In mindfulness class we begin by focusing on one part of our present moment experience, the breath. Then we expand the focus to include other aspects of our moment-to-moment awareness.

Practicing meditation over time, you learn to slow down, nurture calmness and acceptance, and stop “doing” and start “being”. You learn to watch your thoughts and emotions without getting caught up in them; learning that there is more to you than those thoughts and emotions. Mindfulness meditation helps you open to a calm space within you, a source of vast resources. During stressful times, our lives seem chaotic, much like the choppy waves on the surface of the ocean during a storm. Mindfulness meditation can help you access some peace within ourselves, like the calm below the surface of a stormy sea.

Mindfulness meditation helps us to train our minds so we can pay nonjudgmental attention to our experience of daily activities such as eating, communicating, peeling a carrot or hugging a loved one. Most of us do many daily activities on auto-pilot, not really paying attention, not really there, so it is difficult to live in the moment. To illustrate this point, the next time you take a shower, notice your moment-to-moment experience. As you get in the shower, try to slow down your movements and notice your immediate experience. You

may notice the feel of the warm water, the smell of your favorite soap, the sensations as you wash your skin. Most likely your mind will quickly wander away from the present; your mind will not be in the shower, but focused rather on the future or the past. In mindfulness practice, we notice our experience, including the wanderings of the mind, accepting it all and returning again and again to the present moment.

Commitment

A strong commitment to the practice of mindfulness is essential. When an athlete is in training, she exercises even when she's not in the mood, is tired, or is not making the progress she wants. This is the kind of commitment that is essential to make the life style changes that mindfulness practice requires. To paraphrase the athletic shoe commercial, "Just Do It, Mindfully".

The attitude and expectation that you bring to practicing mindfulness is important as well. If you assume that "this is never going to work", well, it probably won't. You may not give it enough of a chance and then your experience will confirm your assumption. Conversely, with the idea that mindfulness is the "magic pill", your expectations may be so high that you try too hard (which is antithetical to mindfulness), feel frustrated and quit. Bringing

an open mind, some healthy skepticism, and persistence to your practice of mindfulness will be helpful.

Just as bringing an open mind to the practice of mindfulness is helpful, consciously cultivating certain attitudes can also help strengthen your commitment. The attitudes discussed below are an integral part of mindfulness; so, to intentionally foster those attitudes in yourself will strengthen your ability to be grounded in the present moment.

QUOTE - “Nothing can bring you peace but yourself.” Ralph Waldo Emerson

Nonjudgment

Developing the ability to be an impartial witness to your own experience helps you cultivate mindfulness. To do that you must first become aware of the judgment in your mind. You don't need to try to stop the judging process. However, when you notice judgment, let go of it, and remind yourself to just observe your experience.

People who begin practicing mindfulness are commonly amazed at the extent to which judgment permeates their thoughts. Some of the judgments are blatant, like “you're so stupid” or “she's so rude”. Other judgments are subtle, like “you should ...” or “I don't deserve that (compliment)” or “this will never work”.

However blatant or subtle, for many people the flow of judgment is near constant. See for yourself . . . for ten minutes notice the judgment in your thought process. What judgments did you make?

When a baby learns to walk there is a process in which she experiments and learns. She pulls herself up and falls. Then she stands for a while without support. Eventually steps are taken, one at a time, but it doesn't happen all at once. We adults do not judge the baby's process, in fact, we think it's precious. If we could treat our own experience in this accepting way, we could more easily be in the moment.

Patience

Mindfulness is helped along by recognizing that sometimes things must unfold on their own. Cultivating patience can help us respect the natural process of events and refrain from detrimental interference.

Imagine the process of learning to play the guitar. It takes time to build callused fingertips, learn to play chords, and develop finger coordination. By understanding that this process has its own timing, you can experience the joy of learning.

The process of mindfulness has its own unfolding process too. Because we are not trained to be mindful, our minds wander from nonjudgmental awareness of the present moment. Being patient with your own mental process will help you continue practicing mindfulness. As you develop mindfulness, you learn to accept and release judgment of each moment. This, in turn, facilitates a deeper level of patience.

QUOTE - "Do you have the patience to wait until your mud settles and the water is clear?" Lao-Tzu, Tao-te-Ching

Beginner's Mind

The next time you are around a baby, watch the child's reaction if she sees a new toy for the first time. She would normally be curious about it; maybe display a look of amazement, a big smile or a baby squeal. As she gets older, the newness wears off because she formulates ideas about the object of her attention. This loss of curiosity, though a natural process, can rob her of the delight in learning more about what comes into her field of attention.

Seeing life with fresh eyes can help us see the richness of life. If we let our old perceptions and beliefs get in the way, we take every day experience for granted and lose the opportunity to learn from our experience. Cultivating a beginner's

mind helps us to be open to new possibilities and learn how our perceptions and attitudes influence our thinking. Notice the next time you eat a meal. If you think you already know what the food tastes like, you may be missing out on really tasting your food. Try eating with a beginner's mind and notice what it is like to eat your favorite food.

QUOTE - "What is needed is to learn afresh, to observe, and to discover for ourselves, the meaning of wholeness." David Bohm

Trust

Consciously developing a sense of trust in yourself, your feelings, and that life is a beneficent mystery, is an integral part of mindfulness. The practice of mindfulness helps us cultivate an awareness of the vast internal resources we have. This in turn helps us to trust our intuition and emotions.

The next time you feel anxious, see if you can trust that your emotion is valid and important instead of listening to someone who might tell you that you shouldn't feel that way.

Non-striving

In practicing mindfulness meditation, we stop doing everything except paying attention to our present-moment experience. Many people think of meditation as

getting relaxed, or enlightened, or becoming a better person. That can happen, but if you strive toward these goals while meditating, it will only bring more tension and limit your experience.

The lessons learned during meditation can be applied to daily activities. Though our culture teaches constant striving and improvement, this can create dissatisfaction with the present moment and the tendency to try to force things to be different. If you are trying to get somewhere or to be someone different, then it implies that you are not okay right now. For example, if you are learning to play the guitar, forcing yourself to play the guitar beyond your current capabilities may only lead to frustration. Alternatively, if you focus on the present moment activity of playing instead of striving to be better than you are right now, you will probably learn more and find pleasure in the process.

QUOTE - NEAR NON-STRIVING SECTION - The joy of non-doing is that nothing else needs to happen for this moment to be complete. Jon Kabat-Zinn

Acceptance

Acceptance of the present moment comes through seeing the moment for what it is. Whatever the present moment brings, it is here right now, so why not accept it? It does not mean that you have to like it or that you take a passive attitude toward your circumstance. It just means seeing it clearly for what it is.

Intentionally fostering acceptance helps make living in the present moment possible. When we resist or deny what is real in the present moment, we use a lot of energy trying to force things to be another way, when, in that very moment, it just isn't. Giving up that struggle and opening to the reality of the moment can help us redirect our energy to finding resourceful ways of handling the present moment and those to come.

In mindfulness meditation, we take each moment as it comes and remind ourselves to be open and receptive to whatever comes to our attention, accepting it because it is here right now.

QUOTE - "I exist as I am, that is enough." Walt Whitman

Letting Go

If you pay attention to your inner experience for awhile, you will probably find that you have certain thoughts and feelings that your mind holds on to. The attachments you have, whether to thoughts, perceptions, attitudes, can unnecessarily limit your life. Worrying about something that you can't change, is an example. Excessive worry about whether your child will be safe in this world

will not make it happen. In fact, it may cause you to be overprotective and controlling. As a result, your child may not learn how to take care of herself.

In mindfulness meditation you can learn to observe your inner experience, notice thoughts and feelings and your tendency to hold on to and react to them. You can also learn to intentionally let go of thoughts, feelings and judgments and simply let things be exactly as they are in the moment.

QUOTE - "You can't stop the waves, but you can learn to surf."

Swami Satchitananda

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BASICS OF MINDFULNESS

- Mindfulness can be defined as paying attention, in the present moment, without judgment
- Developing the ability to pay nonjudgmental attention to our present moment experience can help us:
 - awaken from living life on automatic pilot and live more consciously;
 - live more fully and joyfully
 - learn from our difficult experience to develop more resourceful coping strategies

- build concentration by training the mind to pay attention
- let go of judgment of ourselves and others
- Mindfulness meditation is the way we train ourselves to pay attention in the present moment.

If you want more information on the basics, you can refer to the Health and Spirit April/May, 1998 issue or the author at the Women's Wellness Center at 713.522.7032.

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