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MINDFULNESS

“Mindfulness means paying attention in a particular way; on purpose, in the present moment and non-judgementally”

Jon Kabat-Zinn

Introduction:

Mindfulness is simply being fully present; noticing what we don't normally notice, because our minds are too busy with thoughts of the past or the future: thinking about what we have done or what we need to do. When we are doing things automatically, unconsciously, habitually, without awareness or oblivious to what is happening in and around us; we're being 'mindless' instead of 'mindful'.

Mindfulness can be described as choosing and learning to control our focus of attention.

Numerous psychological studies have shown the benefits of regular mindfulness meditation. For example, studies have shown that:

- Anxiety, depression and irritability all decrease with regular sessions of mindfulness. Memory also improves, reaction times become faster and mental and physical stamina increases.
- People who meditate enjoy better and more fulfilling relationships.
- Studies worldwide have found that meditation reduces the key indicators of chronic stress, including hypertension.
- Studies have now shown that meditation bolsters the immune system and thus helps to fight off colds, flu and other diseases.



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- Meditation has also been found to be effective in reducing the impact of serious conditions, such as chronic pain and cancer, and can even help to relieve drug and alcohol dependence.

To practice mindfulness there are a number of guided sessions available to download via the internet. Apps are also available for smartphones and other devices. Search under 'mindfulness' to find a format that suits you.

Some Mindful Techniques to practice

Breathing Exercise:

Use a clock or timer and set the alarm for 5 minutes.

Sit comfortably in a chair, with both feet on the ground, placing your hands loosely in your lap.

Take a couple of deep breaths in through your nose and out through your mouth, then if you feel comfortable to do so, close your eyes. If you choose to keep your eyes open that's fine, gaze straight ahead and focus on a 'spot' or 'mark' on the wall in front of you. If you then feel your eyelids becoming heavier then allow them to close naturally. Notice how the chair you're sitting on feels underneath you. How do your legs and feet feel? Notice any other sensations in the body. Are you warm or cool? What can you hear around you? Simply observe any sensations you may feel, without judgement or criticism.

Now turn your attention to your breath. Just breathe normally, and notice how each breath feels as it flows in and out. Notice how your chest rises and falls, how the breath feels in the rest of your body. Again don't be concerned about what should or shouldn't be – just observe. Simply inhale and exhale.

As you do this your mind is bound to wander, you may become distracted by thoughts as they pop up in your mind. This is perfectly normal. Simply acknowledge the thought, again without judgement or criticism, and gently bring your awareness back to your breath.

There is no right or wrong way to practice mindfulness. You may find it difficult to focus on your breath to start with, or on particular days. Don't worry about this. Keep practising and extend the time as you feel comfortable. Up to 20 minutes per day is ideal.



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Mindful Eating:

Sit down at a table with your meal without engaging in any other activities – no newspaper, book, TV, radio or music.

As you eat your meal pay full attention to the pieces of food you select, how it looks, how it smells, and the texture and taste of the food as you chew slowly.

When you swallow, notice the sensation as the food goes down, notice any aftertaste or sensation in your mouth.

After you've eaten the meal, how do you feel? How did it feel to eat it mindfully and compare it to when you've eaten at other times, less mindfully? What are the differences?

Mindful Walking:

Using the same principle, while walking, notice the feel of the ground under your feet, your breathing. Just observe what is around you as you walk. Notice the sky, the view, other people; feel the sensation of the wind on your face & body, the temperature on your skin. Stay in the present moment.

If your mind wanders (as it is bound to do), just notice the thought, and bring your attention back to the present moment; again without judgement or criticism.

General:

As you are practising these mindful exercises different thoughts, feelings emotions or memories will come into your mind – sometimes of pleasant events and sometimes of unpleasant events. Without getting caught up in what they are about or wondering why they 'popped' into your mind right now, notice these thoughts as if from a distance – as if you are an 'observer' of your own thoughts, feelings, etc.

Label any emotions that may arise with 'that's a sad/angry/happy/painful feeling' and then allow them to drift or float away. Sometimes the emotion may be strong or intense and may stay with you after you've finished your mindfulness 'practise' – if that happens talk to someone close to you or contact your EAP provider to arrange an appointment to speak with a Counsellor.



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You may find mindfulness is hard at first – keep trying, it will get easier!

You can punctuate your day with short periods of mindfulness and help improve your stress levels.

Reference:

'Mindfulness: An eight week plan for finding peace in a frantic world' (Williams & Penman)