



Issue #10:

MINDFULNESS: MEDITATION AND EVERYDAY PRACTICE



"Mindfulness is the content of one's thoughts, feelings, images, memories, and consciousness itself. It is the psychological training in self-culture, self-improvement and self-help."

— Dr Jon Kabat-Zinn, Professor University of Massachusetts Medical School

Mindfulness is the maintaining of moment-by-moment consciousness of our thoughts, feelings, bodily sensations, and our relationship and interaction with the surrounding environment. It is the practice of being intentional, accepting, and non-judgmental while focusing one's attention on the emotions, thoughts, and sensations occurring in the present moment.¹ Daily practice of mindfulness has been shown to improve both mental and physical states, including, memory, sense of self, empathy, and it reduces stress, anxiety, addiction, pain, psoriasis, and blood pressure.^{2/3}

Every person can benefit from mindfulness meditation, as all of us can use time during our day to reflect and be present.

We often don't do this enough and are fixated on what is to come, versus enjoying or acknowledging the moment. Those who are stressed, feel anxiety, are struggling to concentrate in work and life, or just need to ease their mind and body can benefit from daily practice of mindfulness meditation.

Benefits of mindfulness meditation

The ancient Buddhist religion has been mastering mindfulness meditation for the past 2,500 years. Until recently, mindfulness meditation hasn't been widely practiced or studied by the general public for its medical benefits. With increased popularity in mindfulness meditation, scientists have been able to study the differences in individuals who practice mindfulness versus those who do not. Scientists have been intrigued by the wide range of mental and physical effects mindfulness practices has on an individual's mind and body.⁴



Here are some of the benefits of mindfulness meditation:

- 1. Reduced fear.** MRI results have shown after eight weeks of mindfulness practice that the brain's "fight or flight" centre, the amygdala, appears to shrink. This primal region of the brain is associated with fear, stress, and emotional response. As the amygdala shrinks, the pre-frontal cortex, associated with higher order brain functions such as awareness, concentration, and decision-making becomes thicker. The result, weaker functional connectivity between the amygdala and the brain, causing the connections between areas associated with attention and concentration to become stronger. In other words, our primal responses to fear and stress are superseded by more thoughtful and higher functioning brain responses.⁵
- 2. Reduced pain.** Researchers have found that those who practice mindfulness meditation report feeling less pain than those who are non-practicing. Although brain scans of individuals practicing mindfulness have shown more activity in the areas of the brain associated with pain, the cingulate cortex (associated with the unpleasantness of pain), results suggest that the cingulate cortex and the prefrontal cortex (associated with moderating social behaviour) appear to become uncoupled in those using meditation. The uncoupling of these two cortices, which normally communicate with one another, allows those who are frequent meditators to block the experience and refrain from engaging in the thought process of pain.⁶

- 3. Reduced stress.** Research has shown the focusing on the present rather than letting the mind drift may help to lower levels of cortisol, the stress hormone. High levels of cortisol, a hormone produced by the adrenal gland, are associated with physical and emotional stress. Prolonged release of this hormone contributes to a wide-range of adverse effects on a number of physiological systems (i.e. decreased immune system etc.). Through continued practice of mindfulness meditation, studies have shown reductions in cortisol levels, leading to increased physical and mental health benefits (i.e. lowered blood pressure, less anxiety or stress, etc.).⁷

Mindfulness meditation has many benefits beyond the above mentioned. Five minutes of daily practice can help focus one's mind and prepare for the challenges ahead.

If you are interested in practicing mindfulness meditation, try the exercise below or go online for additional resources. There are many free resources available to learn mindfulness meditation.

Sources:

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8. "Eating One Raisin: A First Taste of Mindfulness." Extension Service, West Virginia University. Adapted from: Williams, M., Teasdale, J., Segal, Z., & Kabat-Zinn, J. (2007). The Mindful Way through Depression: Freeing Yourself from Chronic Unhappiness. New York: Guilford Press.

Practicing Mindfulness and Meditation; Raisin Meditation⁸

Try the following: Five minutes daily for a week.

1. Holding

First, take a raisin and hold it in the palm of your hand or between your finger and thumb.

2. Seeing

Take time to really focus on it; gaze at the raisin with care and full attention—imagine that you've never seen an object like this before in your life. Let your eyes explore every part of it, examining the highlights where the light shines, the darker hollows, the folds and ridges, and any asymmetries or unique features.

3. Touching

Turn the raisin over between your fingers, exploring its texture. Maybe do this with your eyes closed if that enhances your sense of touch.

4. Smelling

Hold the raisin beneath your nose. With each inhalation, take in any smell, aroma, or fragrance that may arise. As you do this, notice anything interesting that may be happening in your mouth or stomach.

5. Placing

Now slowly bring the raisin up to your lips, noticing how your hand and arm know exactly how and where to position it. Gently place the raisin in your mouth; without chewing, noticing how it gets into your mouth in the first place. Spend a few moments focusing on the sensations of having it in your mouth, exploring it with your tongue.

6. Tasting

When you are ready, prepare to chew the raisin, noticing how and where it needs to be for chewing. Then, very consciously, take one or two bites of it and notice what happens in the aftermath, experiencing any waves of taste that emanate from it as you continue chewing. Without swallowing yet, notice the bare sensations of taste and texture in your mouth and how these may change over time, moment by moment. Also, pay attention to any changes in the object itself.

7. Swallowing

When you feel ready to swallow the raisin, see if you can first detect the intention to swallow as it comes up so that even this is experienced consciously before you swallow the raisin.

8. Following

Finally, see if you can feel what is left of the raisin moving down into your stomach, and sense how your body as a whole feels after you have completed this exercise.



With continued practice, mindfulness meditation becomes easier, allowing for improved mental and physical well-being. Evidence suggests that mindfulness increases the more you practice it.



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