



Enriching Lives

PRACTICING MINDFULNESS FOR EMOTIONAL AND MENTAL WELLNESS

Mindfulness as a practice is thousands of years old. Recently, this enriching practice has received attention by the Western part of the world, specifically in its application to mental health and wellness. Incorporating mindfulness into our lives can improve our mental, emotional and physical health. Mindfulness teaches us to be present and to no longer operate under “automatic pilot.” Mindfulness is a practice in which we pay attention in a particular way.

There are three components to mindfulness:

1. On purpose
2. In the present
3. Non-judgmental.

Staying present is critical because it alleviates individuals from getting stuck in the past or future. Human beings can operate mentally and emotionally in three interdependent time dimensions: the past, the present and the future. Living in the present moment allows individuals to experience joy and learn to effectively deal with numerous psychological and physical challenges. Being able to move fluidly and consciously between these time dimensions is vital to our health.

Individuals that are at an impasse are often not present and can get stuck existing in another time dimension. For instance, individuals who are caught in the past tend to focus on past uncomfortable experiences. As they maintain their attention and focus in the past, they are simultaneously neglecting the present moment. Individuals may focus on the past because they are directing their energy to an unresolved situation. At the same time, they are primarily subsisting mentally and emotionally in the past and somewhat in the present. Consequently, individuals may feel sad, empty, lose interest or pleasure in activities they once enjoyed, may feel restless or fatigued, experience a loss of energy, feel worthless, guilty, have regrets, have a diminished ability to think or concentrate, and may have difficulty making decisions or solving problems. Such symptoms correspond to depression. Focusing one’s mental, emotional and physical energy in more than one dimension at once can be draining.

Likewise, as a person becomes fixated on the future, they are ignoring the present. Anticipation of the future can cause worry, anxiety or fear. As a result, the opportunities that each present moment offers us to live blissfully; and constructively cope with life’s current challenges are neglected. Hence, opportunities to grow and transform oneself are lost.

To regain opportunities to realize our fullest potential requires learning to practice mindfulness. Mindfulness provides us with the opportunity to accept and seize each moment. Each moment presents us with sensations, perceptions, thoughts and feelings. The intention is not to resist certain thoughts or emotions because such a practice has the potential to make our inner worlds more difficult to bear. Rather, we can learn to **decenter**, which is developing an understanding that we do not have to believe every thought we experience. Decentering requires that we detach from our thoughts and beliefs and experience these cognitions from a nonjudgmental perspective. We can practice decentering by

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reminding ourselves that we accept each thought as solely that: a perception that we do not have to believe as truth or reality, personalize, internalize or become.

For example, if I have a thought, "I am not lovable," I can acknowledge that this thought is not reflective of reality. Instead, I learn that "I am not lovable" is simply a passing thought. Viewing our experiences from a mindfulness standpoint allows us to be nonjudgmental observers of our thoughts and emotions, in which we can acknowledge, neglect to assign a positive or negative value and release.

As we learn to accept our inner experience, we no longer have a need to **resist** those thoughts and feelings because we can learn to tolerate and consciously accept our experiences. Resisting our thoughts creates frustration because we adhere to an unrealistic expectation. If we resist having the thought, "I expect the worst," we become aggravated with ourselves for having such a thought. The process is the same for emotions. Resisting specific emotions only perpetuates those same emotions. Hence, I become depressed about being depressed.

In addition, emotions can be categorized as primary and secondary. Primary emotions are experienced from individuals' interactions with the environment. Secondary emotions manifest from our reactions to the primary emotions. As clients resist primary emotions, a multitude of secondary emotions ensue such as irritation, anger and anxiety. When the primary emotion is fully embraced, sorrowful secondary emotions do not occur. For example, if a parent says to their child, "You are lazy" the child is often hurt by the parent's comment. The primary emotion is hurt. However, the child may not mindfully process the hurt, which can lead to feelings of anger. The anger ensues as a result of the child being unable to process the hurt. Hence, hurt, sadness and disappointment can easily transform into anger. Conversely, if the child could mindfully process the hurt, the child may not experience secondary emotions.

The goal is to be mindful during our experiences. For instance, when having a thought, try not resisting that thought. Most thoughts or emotions that are resisted are those that we judge as negative. Specific thoughts and emotions are not inherently negative. It is the belief systems that we have regarding those specific thoughts and emotions that label them as such and create distress. Such a perspective implies that it is not our outer experiences that cause us stress, rather it is the meanings we assign to such experiences. If we can reframe experiences that we would ordinarily classify as negative and perceive them as an opportunity, we can learn to embrace such experiences. To further elaborate, anxiety is often perceived as a negative emotion. However, anxiety can be reframed as high energy level that can be constructively utilized to accomplish a goal. Once anxiety is reframed, the experience can be transformed into a positive one. Our thoughts or emotions themselves are not negative, rather how we handle these thoughts and emotions can cause us distress.

As we eliminate such views, we can deconstruct such a belief system and accept the experience for what it is. When we practice mindfulness, our thoughts and emotions no longer overwhelm, overpower or control us. We transform our relationship to our thoughts and emotions. Individuals no longer painfully endure or unravel during such emotions because they have been acknowledged, experienced and released.

On a neurological level, we are retraining our brains to change our associations with specific thoughts and emotions. Imagine your brain's connections as sand. Any time you tread on sand you create a pathway of footprints. Our brains work in a similar manner to walking on sand. Whenever a person engages in a behavior, has a sensation, perception, thought or emotion; a neuronal pathway is created. Each time the person has a similar experience, the connection between the pathways are strengthened.

Specific thoughts and emotions may have been paired with distress. Utilizing mindfulness can change previous thoughts and emotions and reconnect them with relaxation. Changing the brains wiring is a concept that is referred to as neuroplasticity.

We can **reframe** our experiences and perceive each thought and emotion as an opportunity to practice mindfulness. As we observe ourselves focusing on the past or future, we are grateful that we had a moment of realization in which we were not mindful and were able to shift our attention back to the present moment. Every day we are presented with thousands of opportunities to catch ourselves drifting and can gently bring our attention to the present. Therefore, our experiences are welcomed, accepted, experienced and released. We learn to relax when challenged by our thoughts or emotions. As we develop a healthier relationship to our thoughts and emotions, we can choose how to respond to them rather than unconsciously react.

Understanding mindfulness makes individuals cognizant of moments in which individuals are not mindful. Mindfulness is a practice that requires reasonable expectations. You may begin your mindfulness practice by paying attention to a full duration of one cycle of inhalation and exhalation. Such a practice allows one to fully enjoy one's breath. There is no destination; rather we are present during our journey, practice our skill and accept imperfection. A small moment of mindfulness has tremendous benefits of reducing stress.

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