

Mindfulness- Not just for Stress Reduction

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Mindfulness, which trains you to focus your mind on the present moment, is more than a popular meditation technique. It's been shown to help treat depression and anxiety and improve sleep quality. And it's now being studied as a complementary therapy for cancer, stroke, multiple sclerosis, and pain. "We're seeing an exponential increase in doctors embracing mindfulness as a treatment," says Dr. Ronald Siegel, assistant professor of psychology at Harvard Medical School and faculty editor of the Harvard Special Health Report Positive Psychology.

Mindfulness trains you to observe your thoughts, emotions, and internal and external sensations without judgment. This keeps your thoughts from drifting to the past or future and helps you focus on each moment as it happens. The process can lead to improvements in concentration and emotional well-being.

Mindfulness also activates the relaxation response (the opposite of the fight-or-flight response), which reduces stress and thereby lowers your levels of epinephrine (adrenaline) and cortisol, as well as lowering your blood pressure, heart rate, breathing rate, and oxygen consumption.

Impact on physical conditions-

How do stress reduction and focusing on the present moment help treat physical conditions? Many of these conditions—from chronic back pain to psoriasis—actually have stress-related components, meaning that stress helps to create, maintain, and worsen the symptoms of the condition. "Reducing stress reduces symptoms and may also assist in resolving the disorder," explains Dr. Siegel.

Many disorders are made worse by trying to avoid or resist discomfort. "Insomnia is a good example of this. Feeling afraid that you won't get to sleep and trying too hard to sleep is what keeps you awake," says Dr. Siegel. "Mindfulness helps us to accept and embrace both pleasant and unpleasant experiences. If we can allow unpleasant experiences, it helps us to relax and function more normally physically."

In other disorders, such as cancer, psychological factors have little influence on the disease. "However, thoughts have a big effect on how a person functions with cancer and how one navigates the moment-to-moment experience of having the disease," says Dr. Siegel. "Mindfulness helps people cope better by living more fully in the presence of the disease and thereby suffering less."

Mindfulness quick-start guide

Want to try mindfulness? Try this for 10 minutes a day initially, and work up from there:

Sit quietly, close your eyes, and focus on your breathing.

Say a word such as "peace" or "one" each time you exhale.

Don't worry about thoughts that come to mind; come back to them later, and repeat your word. This helps bring your attention back to the present. You may only be able to sustain this for a few moments as you begin, but with practice you'll find yourself relaxing for longer periods.

How it's being used

Mindfulness isn't a cure-all for illness; it's a complementary therapy. Does it work? "I've seen people combine mindfulness with an incremental but steady return to physical activity, and very often recover fully from chronic back pain," says Dr. Siegel. Mindfulness is also being used for bronchitis (to help relieve the distress of coughing), gastrointestinal distress, headaches, and sleep disturbances, among other conditions.

Dr. Randal Zusman, a cardiologist and Harvard Medical School associate professor, prescribes mindfulness and other meditative practices to help lower blood pressure. "We've found that the relaxation response is very effective in lowering blood pressure by as much as 15 or more points. This is a strategy that has potential for anyone to use," he says. Anyone who's willing to make an effort, that is. "There will always be some who prefer interventions that don't require work and help them avoid discomfort. But for people who are willing to work on themselves, mindfulness is the medicine of the future," says Dr. Siegel.

Not all doctors prescribe mindfulness. An editorial published Oct. 6, 2015, in *The Journal of the American Medical Association*, notes that while 79% of medical schools offer some element of mindfulness training, some physicians grounded in Western medicine are not on board yet with a place for mindfulness in the clinical toolbox. "Most doctors have far more training in prescribing drugs and procedures than in teaching health-enhancing skills," says Dr. Siegel. "But we can supplement conventional medical interventions by learning to practice mindfulness ourselves."