

Mindfulness

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In recent years, the word *mindful* has been popping up everywhere. You can find workshops on mindfulness meditation; magazine articles on mindful eating; and books on mindful *everything* (Amazon turns up over 7000 books using the word mindfulness).

While I'm not usually much of a trend follower, I issue a mea culpa here not only for the title of this of column, but also because "Mindful Healing" is the name of my health counseling practice. The name seemed appropriate because whether I am coaching someone towards a healthy lifestyle, engaging them in a healing relationship with food, or helping a client cope with cancer treatment, surgery, or a chronic illness, I find mindfulness principles and practices to be at the core of my approach. Why? Because they work beautifully. They move us in the direction of being more fully present, more fully aware of the world around us in a positive, healing way. They teach us about balance, about living our lives in alignment with our values, and about attending to the needs of our minds, our bodies, and our spirits.

Most people have a general idea of what mindfulness is, yet ask someone to define it and you get a blank look, or a rambling response. So what exactly is this mindfulness anyway?

First, the concept comes from Buddhism. Jon Kabat-Zinn, Ph.D. has taught mindfulness meditation to thousands at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center. He says "Simply put, mindfulness is moment-to-moment awareness... The disciplined practice of residing in stillness, even for short periods, leads, in time, to new ways of seeing, new pathways for knowing, and new choices for action that might not have been seen but for the stillness itself. . Regular practice over the long term can enhance your ability to perceive yourself and your place in the world with acuity, precision, and acceptance."

So do you have to meditate to be mindful? Absolutely not. While meditating works beautifully for many, I recognize the hard fact that for many others meditating regularly is never going to happen. In fact, while I sometimes enjoy being led through a meditation, I would usually rather do laundry than sit and meditate on my own. Given my work, this is a bit like Ben and Jerry admitting they never eat ice cream. But I'm both honest and deeply practical. If something doesn't work for me, I don't do it. Instead, I emphasize ways of incorporating a mindful approach into my daily life by being more aware of the moment, starting with a few minutes here and there and slowly building towards a more mindful orientation in general.

Simple concept, so it must be easy to do, right? Well, no, not really. Think about your day for a moment. Was it a blur of activity? Kids, work, driving, eating, phone calls, emails, errands, appointments, and the list goes on. How much time do you think you were fully aware? Probably not much if you are like most people. Modern life pushes us away from mindfulness.

We live our lives at full throttle, rarely taking the time to be consciously aware of ourselves, our surroundings, our thoughts, feelings, sensations. And we pay the price. Often our life is filled to the brim with activity, and yet it feels flat and empty.

Does the expression “stop and smell the roses” come to mind? If so, you are thinking of the American version of a concept that goes back thousands of years. Today take just a moment to stop, breathe, notice what is in front of you, notice how you are feeling, and just *be in the moment*.

You might be surprised at how good it makes you feel. Or you may notice that you are, in fact, not feeling so hot. You might be feeling angry, annoyed, or irritated; or you may have a headache, or your back is complaining. No matter. Simply acknowledging how you really feel is an important first step. With that knowledge, that awareness, you can then choose to take it a step further and ask yourself why you are feeling good, bad, or indifferent. The answer may not be readily apparent, especially if you are unaccustomed to even a fleeting moment of navel gazing.

Rather than fret over the answer, just keep your awareness on the question and let the answer percolate to the surface on its own. Sometime this is easier to do with your eyes closed, or softly focused on an object. We are designed physically, emotionally, and spiritually with continual information feedback loops. Whatever is going on within us at any moment in time, whether it is positive, negative, or neutral, we have access to the knowledge we need to move us back to being centered, and balanced.

Okay, you say, I get the point. I stopped and smelled a rose today. I listened to my body. Big deal.

Actually, it *is* a big deal. Because the cumulative effect of doing so is enormous. On a practical level, practicing mindfulness *regularly* may improve your health in countless ways. It has a calming affect that is great for your blood pressure; your digestive track will say “thank you”; your backache or headache will begin to disappear; and your immune system is ready to take on the world.

Emotionally, you will find it to be a great way of reducing anxiety, depression, anger, and frustration. This will in turn improve the quality of your relationships with family members, friends, and coworkers.

Finally, on a spiritual level, which was the original focus of mindfulness practices, you will feel a deepening of a sense of integrity within yourself and in your connections to the world around you.

Not bad for a simple concept.

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