



Modern science highlights value of meditative, mindfulness skills

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Mindfulness skills have long been a part of various meditative practices. These techniques historically are primarily derived from the teachings of the Buddha, but similar approaches can be found in many contemplative traditions. Although mindfulness skills are most often associated with spiritual development, modern science is demonstrating their benefit as an effective medical intervention.

Research into the clinical applications of mindfulness has been pioneered by Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn at the University of Massachusetts Medical center. Dr. Kabat-Zinn adapted traditional mindfulness trainings to medical practice and developed a program called Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) to teach these skills to patients. MBSR and related programs have since been shown to help people cope more effectively with chronic pain, depression, and anxiety, as well as to help reduce substance abuse, self-injury and other destructive behaviors. For this reason Mindfulness approaches are now at the core of several contemporary therapies, including Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) and Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT).

Kabat-Zinn defines mindfulness as “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally.” Mindfulness is a type of practiced awareness, a way of clearly seeing what is without evaluation or judgment. It is a way of

intentionally relating to our experience. There is a very subtle yet profound and deep seeded part of us that resists certain experiences, especially if they are unpleasant. We don’t want to have some thoughts, feelings, sensations or circumstances. We label them as bad or unwanted, we often judge or criticize ourselves for having them, and we try very hard to make them go away. This is very natural and understandable, but our not wanting certain experiences and our efforts to get rid of them can actually prolong and intensify our struggle with strong moods and distressing thoughts.

Instead, mindfulness invites us to bring a sense of acceptance to experiences. This does not mean that we give up and do nothing, nor does it suggest that we must approve of or like the experience. Acceptance is not an endorsement; it is recognition of what is already there. By accepting our experience we get out of the tug of war with it, which frees up energy that we can then put towards doing things that have a better chance of helping us.

Initial mindfulness training involves learning to pay attention without judgment to an aspect of our here-and-now moment-to-moment experience (most often the breath), as well as ways to re-focus when our attention waivers. Usually at first the skills are practiced while sitting and in a quiet place to minimize distraction. Eventually daily activities, such as walking and eating, are used to practice mindfulness. No longer does someone need to travel deep into the jungles of India or climb high atop the mountains of the Himalayas to learn these practices.

Like any skill mindfulness requires practice, time, and effort to learn. The payoffs, however, are substantial. Mindfulness practice cultivates a sense of freedom, peace and happiness that helps us to more consistently and effectively engage in the activities that we consider important and meaningful for our lives.

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