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What is mindfulness?

Mindfulness is the gentle effort to be continuously present with experience. Jon Kabat-Zinn, a famous teacher of mindfulness meditation and the founder of the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction program at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center defines mindfulness as: “Mindfulness means paying attention in a particular way; On purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally.”

□ **Paying attention “on purpose”**

First of all, mindfulness involves paying attention “on purpose”. Mindfulness involves a conscious direction of our awareness. We sometimes (me included) talk about “mindfulness” and “awareness” as if they were interchangeable terms, but that’s not a good habit to get into. I may be aware I’m irritable, but that wouldn’t mean I was being mindful of my irritability. In order to be mindful I have to be purposefully aware of myself, not just vaguely and habitually aware. Knowing that you are eating is not the same as eating mindfully.

Let’s take that example of eating and look at it a bit further. When we are purposefully aware of eating, we are consciously being aware of the process of eating. We’re deliberately noticing the sensations and our responses to those sensations. We’re noticing the mind wandering, and when it does wander we purposefully bring our attention back.

When we’re eating unmindfully we may in theory be aware of what we’re doing, but we’re probably thinking about a hundred and one other things at the same time, and we may also be watching TV, talking, or reading — or even all three! So a very small part of our awareness is absorbed with eating, and we may be only barely aware of the physical sensations and even less aware of our thoughts and emotions.

Because we’re only dimly aware of our thoughts, they wander in an unrestricted way. There’s no conscious attempt to bring our attention back to our eating. There’s no purposefulness.

This purposefulness is a very important part of mindfulness. Having the purpose of staying with our experience, whether that's the breath, or a particular emotion, or something as simple as eating, means that we are actively shaping the mind.

□ **Paying attention “in the present moment”**

Left to itself the mind wanders through all kinds of thoughts — including thoughts expressing anger, craving, depression, revenge, self-pity, etc. As we indulge in these kinds of thoughts we reinforce those emotions in our hearts and cause ourselves to suffer. Mostly these thoughts are about the past or future. The past no longer exists. The future is just a fantasy until it happens. The one moment we actually can experience — the present moment — is the one we seem most to avoid.

So in mindfulness we're concerned with noticing what's going on right now. That doesn't mean we can no longer think about the past or future, but when we do so we do so mindfully, so that we're aware that right now we're thinking about the past or future.

However in meditation, we are concerned with what's arising in the present moment. When thoughts about the past or future take us away from our present moment experience and we “space out” we try to notice this and just come back to now.

By purposefully directing our awareness away from such thoughts and towards the “anchor” or our present moment experience, we decrease their effect on our lives and we create instead a space of freedom where calmness and contentment can grow.

Paying attention “non-judgmentally”

Mindfulness is an emotionally non-reactive state. We don't judge that this experience is good and that one is bad. Or if we do make those judgments we simply notice them and let go of them. We don't get upset because we're experiencing something we don't want to be experiencing or because we're not experiencing what we would rather be experiencing. We simply accept whatever arises. We observe it mindfully. We notice it arising, passing through us, and ceasing to exist.

Whether it's a pleasant experience or a painful experience we treat it the same way.

Cognitively, mindfulness is aware that certain experiences are pleasant and some are unpleasant, but on an emotional level we simply don't react. We call this "equanimity" — stillness and balance of mind.

What are the health benefits of mindfulness?

Several studies with college students suggest that the practice of mindfulness leads to decreases in stress and anxiety, improvements in concentration and attention, and increases in self-awareness and overall emotional well-being. Professor Willoughby Britton, a clinical psychologist at Brown, has studied the effects of mindfulness meditation on Brown students and has found that meditation decreases anxiety.

Mindfulness is often used as one aspect of treatment for a range of issues, such as anxiety, depression, substance abuse, binge eating disorder, chronic pain and cancer.

Practicing mindfulness meditation for brief periods, even 5 or 10 minutes a day, can improve your health.