

What's Mindfulness Got To Do With It?

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I've just returned from a conference titled "*Awakening to Mindfulness*", where I heard experts from around the country explain how they're using mindfulness-based therapies to treat stress-related illness, chronic pain, severe depression, personality disorders, and addiction, with excellent results. (I will be writing more about these topics in upcoming months.)

So what exactly is mindfulness? Here's one definition: "*Mindfulness is: paying attention, on purpose, in a particular way, in the present moment, with non-judging awareness.*" (Jon Kabat-Zinn)

Jon Kabat-Zinn, PhD, is an MIT-trained molecular biologist who studied yoga and meditation in the 1960s. His research career focused on mind/body interactions for healing, specializing in patients with chronic pain and stress-related illness, and in 1979 he founded the first mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) clinic at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center. Since then, the clinic has treated thousands of people, and he has trained others who have replicated his program in clinics across the country. His program was profiled in Bill Moyer's 1995 PBS series, *Healing and the Mind*, and he's written several popular books, including *Full Catastrophe Living: Using the Wisdom of Your Body and Mind to Face Stress, Pain and Illness*.

But yoga and meditation have been around for centuries - why the big deal now? In part, recent advances in science and technology (e.g. brain scans) have allowed us to observe and measure the beneficial effects of mindfulness practices on the mind and body, demonstrating the "how" of "how it works", whereas before we simply had to take "it works" on faith. **Medical and psychological professionals are embracing mindfulness-based therapy because it's been empirically validated as effective.**

And we're all familiar with *mindlessness*: the attitude with which some people go through their daily lives, not paying attention to where they're going or what they're doing or saying, yet being quite judgmental about others doing the same. Maybe we're also embracing mindfulness because we're fed up with mindlessness?

What mindfulness is not: a specific religion or religious practice. While mindfulness meditation practice has its roots in Buddhism, every major religion has mindful-awareness practices (prayer, rituals, silent retreats, etc). Mindfulness is completely compatible with anyone's religious beliefs.

Contrary to popular belief, mindfulness is not especially difficult to learn. A typical MBSR class consists of a two-and-a-half hour session once a week for 8 weeks. A common complaint among people who try meditating for the first time is "I can't do it - I can't quiet my thoughts, or sit still that long." Keep in mind that everyone who meditates experiences this; also meditation is only one aspect of mindfulness, and it can be beneficial even if done for just a few minutes at a time. Other mindfulness practices involve paying attention to your breathing, or focusing on one thing, whether an object, a sound, or an activity. Yoga, Tai Chi, and Qigong are also mindfulness-based practices.

If you'd like to learn more about mindfulness and how it could benefit you, now is an excellent time. There are many good books and classes available - or contact me for a personal consultation:

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