

## The Skeptic's Guide to Mindfulness

One of my students recently shared that she's having trouble embracing the practice of mindfulness, when her worry about climate change, and the overall state of the world we live in, is giving her nightmares. "How will focusing on my breath help anything, when these are real problems that affect all of us and aren't getting fixed?" she asked.

I too am very concerned about the state of the world, and understand why she may dismiss the "Mindfulness movement" as a bunch of mindless Pollyannas who have stuck their heads in the sand. What is the point in taking time to meditate, or trying to be present in the moment, when we're facing such serious, civilization-threatening issues?

Actually, I shared her skepticism for many years. My first exposure to meditation was as a sophomore in college, when I read "*Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*." Over the years, I tried meditating, as some of my friends joined an ashram, or the San Francisco Zen Center; but as I'm a naturally skeptical person, I wasn't interested in joining anything, and frankly I was turned off by their descriptions of arising at dawn to sit and meditate for an hour, because I'm not a morning person. And while the practicing meditators I knew did seem to have an aura of inner peace, I'll confess I thought they were a little out of touch with reality!

So what changed my mind about mindfulness? How did I become someone who now sits and meditates every day (though still not first thing in the morning)? First, it was learning about *neuroplasticity*, the amazing ability of the brain to keep adapting itself, and that it's possible to "re-wire" our brains throughout our lives by changing the way we use them.

Secondly, it was reading about how science has allowed us to see what's happening inside the brains of regular meditators, and understand that meditation changes brain function in long-lasting ways. And then there is the growing body of scientific evidence demonstrating that even a few minutes a day of meditation and other mindfulness practices can lower blood cortisol levels and blood pressure, increase immune response, relieve chronic pain, improve sleep, reduce anxiety, and decrease negative thinking.

And finally, it was experiencing it directly, in MBSR (Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction) classes I took, and noticing the subtle changes that began to appear after a few weeks of doing the daily "homework" practices - like feeling calmer, being less reactive, becoming a better listener. I have particularly noticed how it's made me a better therapist: I am now more able to be fully present with each person, listening without so much mind wandering, which helps me offer the most useful guidance as well as remember what we've discussed from session to session. And I've seen the difference it can make in many of my clients' and students' lives - it truly is a powerful tool for change and personal growth.

So if you're skeptical about the value of mindfulness in your life, I'd like to invite you to try it for yourself. It may not solve the climate change problem, but it might change your life.