**Physician Focus: Mindfulness**

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By Michael Guidi, D.O. and Jefferson Prince, M.D.



Jefferson Prince, M.D. (left) and Michael Guidi, D.O. (right)

The stress of daily life can take many forms: financial pressures, family demands or crises, and professional or occupational tensions.  These circumstances can produce anxiety, fatigue, sleeplessness, and other physical conditions that can be harmful to our mental and physical health.     
  
An emerging practice to address these concerns and improve individual health is called mindfulness.    
  
Mindfulness came into practice more than 30 years ago.  Jon Kabat-Zinn, the founder of modern-day mindfulness who established the Stress Reduction Clinic at the University of Massachusetts Medical School in the late 1970's, defines it as follows: paying attention in a particular way, on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally.     
  
The National Institutes of Health (NIH), part of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, expands on the definition: “being completely aware of what’s happening in the present—of all that’s going on inside and all that’s happening around you.  It means not living your life on “autopilot.” Instead, a person experiences life as it unfolds moment to moment, good and bad, and without judgment or preconceived notions.”   
  
More than 2,500 research studies have investigated mindfulness and the mind-body connection and its effects on a variety of medical conditions – anxiety, depression, cancer, acute and chronic pain, and chronic illnesses such as diabetes and heart disease.    
  
Most of those studies have shown positive outcomes.  Patients reported feeling better, more relaxed and more compassionate; blood pressures and heart rates were reduced to healthful levels. Supported by those studies, mindfulness is now reaching mainstream medicine. As testimony to its acceptance, NIH, the largest biomedical research agency in the world, has allotted $100 million to expand research into mindfulness.    
  
Mindfulness can mean several things. In a historical sense, it can mean “I’m aware of what’s going on,” or “I’m paying attention.” In a clinical sense, however, it is a way for people to participate in their own health care, by raising awareness of their thoughts, physical sensations, and surroundings.  Practicing mindfulness leads patients to concentrate on the present, not to worry about things that happened in their past and not to agonize or be fearful of what might come in the future.   
  
A key to mindfulness is being nonjudgmental.  All of us can be negative and critical about people and things around us.  However, when a person becomes more nonjudgmental, more positively focused, and more accepting, he or she will be able to assess and react to situations “in the present moment” without preconceived ideas.    
  
People who experience difficulties, whether they are medical, social, or emotional, can use mindfulness to train their mind to deal with those difficulties in a way that opens up new possibilities, instead of reacting out of habit or doing the same thing over and over again.      
  
It is important to remember that the purpose of mindfulness is not to replace a medicine or other therapy, but to improve our ability to relate to the circumstances of our lives. Mindfulness can be healing, in making us adapt to our circumstances. It can also be personally revealing, in opening up different possibilities for us to manage those circumstances.     
  
The mindfulness approach is a way to complement and enhance individual health, and it can help people of all ages and in many circumstances: families of patients undergoing serious medical conditions, caregivers who experience increasing amounts of stress in dealing with major illnesses such as dementia, or patients themselves who must deal with chronic conditions such as heart disease, diabetes, or depression.  It is also becoming increasingly useful in treating addiction, substance abuse, post-traumatic stress disorder, and even pain.     
  
While the practice of mindfulness grows in health care, it is also being applied in other areas as well, such as business and education.  Major corporations, for example, are establishing mindfulness training for executives and employees to improve their health as well as increase productivity and creativity, and The Hawn Foundation promotes a program called MindUP, which teaches students to regulate their own behavior and concentrate on achieving academic success. Such an approach with young people can help to resolve peer conflicts and reduce aggressive or risky behavior such as bullying or substance abuse.      
  
For more information on mindfulness, including the science behind it, how it is learned, and how it can be helpful in health and well-being, visit [www.mindfulnet.org](http://www.mindfulnet.org/). For a video discussion, visit [www.physicianfocus.org/mindfulness](http://www.physicianfocus.org/mindfulness).    
    
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Cope with stress, pain, and the challenges of everyday life

Deal with disturbing events with grace and composure

Be fully present and alive in this moment

MBSR has been shown to significantly improve health-related quality of life.

(functional status, well-being, reduced physical symptoms, psychological distress)

Research on the impact of mindfulness meditation on a variety of symptoms including anxiety

disorder, chronic pain and psoriasis has been conducted over the past 20 years by Dr. Kabat-Zinn.

He states that "participants report a sharp drop over the eight week course in the number of

medical symptoms originally reported, as well as psychological problems such as anxiety,

depression and hostility. These improvements occur reproducibly in the majority of participants in

every class. They also occur regardless of diagnosis, suggesting that the program is relevant to

people with a wide range of medical disorders and life situations."

He also notes, "In addition to having fewer symptoms, people experience improvements in how

they view themselves and the world. They report feeling more self-confident, assertive and

motivated to take better care of themselves and more confident in their ability to respond

effectively in stressful circumstances. They also feel a greater sense of control over their lives, an

increased willingness to look at stressful events as challenges rather than threats, and a greater

sense of meaning in life."

One frustrated participant came to the clinic with this question: "Can a fish know it is in water? I

don't think it is possible, because if you take the fish out of the water, it will die." He saw himself

as someone immersed in a cloudy mindstew, unable to gain perspective on himself or his world.

Was there the possibility that he could see himself and his thought patterns more clearly?

In the practice of mindfulness meditation, one can cultivate the sense of oneself as a present

moment awareness that observes the thoughts that arise in the mind and views them as

something to be noted, perhaps responded to, but not to be identified with as "me." As one begins

to quiet the mind, this view of our thoughts in relation to ourselves can be cultivated more and

more deeply, which can result in more clarity about who we really are. When we realize we are

not our thoughts, we can explore them more deeply and begin to move into a greater stillness

that offers us further information about who we may really be at our core. Just as the ocean has

waves on the surface of the water as well as the silent depths below, we too can know the thought

patterns on the surface, as well as the quiet depths within. And so, in answer to this patient's

question, the fish does have the possibility of knowing something of the water it is in.

In addition to mindfulness meditation in the medical setting, the training has also been broadened

in scope to include inmates in the prison system, inner city residents, Olympic rowing athletes,

judges, the Chicago Bulls basketball team, corporate executives, as well as grammar school

children. Over 240 mindfulness-based stress reduction programs are currently being offered

around the country. Instructors vary with respect to their backgrounds, most being health care

professionals with teaching and clinical experience in the health field, or having extensive

meditation and yoga backgrounds.

Whether we are pressed by serious pain and stress, or simply by a mild sense that things are not

as we would like them to be, mindfulness meditation is a tool that allows us to see our world as if

standing and looking at the landscape of our own particular life and the world around us from a

new vantage point. We can begin to recognize the ways in which we contribute to our own

discontent and can decide to make a change. Mindfulness meditation offers that opportunity.

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Roberta Lewis is a certified yoga teacher since 1978, trained in Integral Yoga, with several years study in Iyengar Yoga, and

training in gentle patient-oriented yoga as offered at the UMass-Memorial Medical Center's Stress Reduction Program founded

by Jon Kabat-Zinn. She has been a meditator in the Yoga and Vipassana traditions since 1976. She is trained in Mindfulness-

Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) and was a part of the clinical staff of the UMass Stress Reduction Clinic as far back as 1996. At

the time this article was written, she taught yoga and MBSR at Listening: The Barre Integrated Health