

Mindfulness:

Unlocking the Door to Better Physical & Emotional Well-Being

by Michelle Kelley

The practice of mindfulness is not only sweeping through mainstream America, it is also sweeping through the mental health and business worlds.

Google, Target and General Mills are just a few businesses offering mindfulness meditation groups and courses for their employees. Google's Search Inside Yourself class is waitlisted. They also offer mindful lunches conducted in complete silence as well as a labyrinth for walking meditations.

Quiet contemplation is seen as the new caffeine, unlocking productivity and creative bursts. This is the real reason businesses are embracing mindfulness meditation practices. With increased productivity, businesses make more money and have happier employees who want to stick around.

The results are conclusive: Practicing mindfulness can reduce stress, improve productivity, increase compassion and strengthen relationships. It's not only changing businesses but relationships as well.

Mindfulness meditation is not just woo-woo stuff; it is backed by hard science. Research shows us that practicing non-judgmental awareness (a.k.a. mindfulness) changes our brain chemistry and can rewire how our brain responds to stress.

Researchers at Boston University showed that people react less to emotionally-charged images after receiving mindfulness meditation

training. Imagine what this can mean to someone who is struggling with anger management issues.

What is Mindfulness?

Mindfulness is the practice of maintaining a nonjudgmental state of awareness of your thoughts, emotions, and experiences. It's a different way of paying attention. It's about training your mind to be more focused, present and purposeful. It's about improving the quality of your relationships.

Mindfulness practices include meditation, yoga, and tai chi which all incorporate non-judgmental awareness of the present moment. Certain activities such as gardening, walking in nature or spending time with your pets can cultivate a mindfulness state. This practice can be done formally or informally at any time of the day. It's a skill set that anyone can develop – even children.

As a matter of fact, I often teach children how to cultivate mindfulness in dealing with high-conflict relationships, difficult situations or intense emotions.

Key Points

- Practicing mindfulness improves both mental and physical health.
- Mindfulness involves focusing on your thoughts, emotions and body awareness – without judgment.
- It requires patience, practice and more practice.

Mindfulness Improves Physical Health

According to recent research, the practice of mindfulness can have positive effects on your health. Physical and emotional health are closely connected. Here are some of the possible benefits.

- decreased stress
- improved sleep
- less chronic pain
- lower blood pressure
- reduced inflammation

Mindfulness Improves Emotional Health

Mindfulness increases emotional intelligence and gives you greater control over your emotions. The field of psychology has recently turned to mindfulness training to treat conditions such as:

- depression
- anxiety



- substance abuse
- eating disorders /emotional eating
- obsessive compulsive disorders
- anger management
- oppositional defiance in children
- high-conflict relationships

Mindfulness Improves Relationships

Paying close, focused attention (i.e. being mindful) to your actions and reactions can help you to break out of dysfunctional patterns in your relationships thereby opening the way to create new, healthier patterns. It can also help you to cultivate compassion and regulate your emotions, so that you are responding instead of reacting (or over reacting). All of these are key ingredients to healthy relationships.

In my work with both adults and children, I regularly use mindfulness techniques to teach clients how to create positive, lasting changes in their mood, behavior and relationships. One of the benefits of counseling is learning how to think differently - in a purposeful, constructive way. Once you learn a new skill set, it's yours to use for the rest of your life.

My clients are reporting feeling less stressed, increased compassion for themselves and others, and less conflict in their relationships. The results are proof that mindfulness yields results that people care about. We all want more peace and happier relationships. It starts with mindfulness. Otherwise, you are just working on creating change at the level of symptoms instead of cause.

One of my clients, who suffered from compassion fatigue (a common ailment for a woman), began practicing mindfulness in her quiet moments. This allowed her to tap into her thoughts of feeling victimized, which she was unaware of previously. Upon further reflection and discussion,

she was able to change her thought patterns (i.e. rewire her brain) and make empowering decisions. Her compassion fatigue was greatly reduced and she was able to more fully enjoy her relationships.

An angry teen shared with me that she had no idea why she was so angry. She was surprised how much of her energy was being drained by this emotion and she wanted to be free from it. As she began to pay close attention to her anger (without judgment) and its triggers, she realized that she had more control and ability to choose her emotions than she realized. The state of being mindful allowed her to create new thoughts, new behaviors and new patterns – thus rewiring her brain.

I remember when my daughter was very angry with me and was blaming me for having divorced parents. I was able to calmly listen to her and validate her emotions and feelings. I let her have her moment. After the moment passed, she was sort of startled that I didn't have much of a reaction. I think she really appreciated the fact that I let her be upset, without trying to justify my feelings or minimize hers. She was and is always allowed to be upset, even with me.

How to Incorporate Mindfulness Practices

Start informally. You can begin right now. Take a moment. Take a breath. What are you feeling, thinking? Are you placing judgment somewhere? Most of us do, so just take notice.

Focus your mind. Ask your mind to stay in the moment. Right now you are reading and learning from this article. If it wanders, then gently redirect it.

Practice non-judgment. Your thoughts and feelings are neither good nor bad so resist the urge to label

them. We all experience a range of emotions. Allow them to just exist.

Accept the present moment. This moment in time is what it is. You are here, sitting in your chair, breathing, expanding your knowledge. Get out of it all that you can.

You can practice those steps at any time: while you're enjoying dinner with your family, walking your dog or if you feel as though you're having a particularly bad day.

Finally! We are acknowledging the mind is a powerful tool of transformation. I hope you are as excited as I am to embrace self-awareness and realize that we can change our lives and our relationships.

Recommended Readings:

Rewire Your Brain for Love: Creating Vibrant Relationships Using the Science of Mindfulness
by Marsha Lucas

Mindful Work: How Meditation is Changing Business from the Inside Out
by David Gelles

The Power of Now
by Eckhart Tolle

Mindfulness Meditation: Nine Guided Practices to Awaken Presence and Open Your Heart (Audio CD)
by Tara Brach



Michelle Kelley, LCSW is a licensed counselor, confidence coach and relationship expert. She works closely with her clients to identify limiting beliefs, develop mindfulness and create a plan for change. Empowering women and girls is her mission and passion. Please visit www.GirlsStandStrong.com or call 703.505.2413 for more information.