

“Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction”: Reclaiming Your Essential Health and Wholeness

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At times, in life, we all suffer. This is a fundamental fact of the human condition. Often, suffering arrives in the guise of “stress”: anxiety, depression, chronic pain and health conditions, terminal illness, interpersonal conflict, or simply feeling overwhelmed and “out of control.” We look to health care providers to “feel better”, to find relief, to “fix” our problems. But what happens when we have done all that there is to do? When we’ve followed all the protocols, taken our medications, herbs, and remedies, gone to therapy, followed the exercise regimen as prescribed...and we’re still suffering, still trying to come to terms with, as Zorba the Greek put it, the “full catastrophe” of our lives?

A growing body of research on an approach called Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) is demonstrating that, rather than struggling to change or fix what’s “wrong,” accepting your life’s conditions just as they are right now is key to increasing experiences of health and well-being. Developed in 1979 by Jon Kabat-Zinn, PhD, at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, the MBSR program has graduated over 15,000 patients, not including participants in more than 250 other MBSR programs around the world. Published research over the past two decades shows that the majority of people who complete the program report lasting decreases in physical and psychological symptoms, reductions in levels of pain, an increased ability to cope with persisting pain and stressful situations, and greater enthusiasm and energy for life. (1)

How are these results achieved? Strange as it may sound, these kinds of profound and potentially life-transforming changes happen by letting go of wanting things to be any different than they are in this very moment. Through intensive and systematic training in mindfulness meditation during eight weekly classes and one day-long class, MBSR cultivates in participants an ability to change, not the stressful circumstances of their lives, but their relationship to what already is. Rather than deny, reject, suppress or distract themselves from their stress, participants are invited to turn toward their experience, even that which is most painful or aversive, with an attitude of curiosity and acceptance.

What exactly is mindfulness? Mindfulness is no more and no less than a way of directing awareness and attention to whatever is happening right here and now, of being present for and in our lives as they are unfolding. Most of us are more intimate with a state of mind characterized by mind/essness, in which we are distracted from what is happening in the present moment by our thoughts, opinions, memories, regrets and plans for or worries about the future. Yet

mindfulness is a universal quality; as humans we all have the inherent capacity to pay attention and can cultivate it through practices such as meditation.

Originating in Eastern spiritual traditions, and most explicitly in Buddhism, mindfulness meditation has long been offered as a method of reducing suffering and increasing equanimity, health and well-being. But as the current applications of mindfulness in medical, mental health, and wellness settings have shown, you don't have to be Buddhist to benefit from these ancient practices. All you have to do is be human, and be willing to look deeply into yourself to discover, or recover, your innate resources for coming to grips with the challenges and demands of your life in ways that support growing, learning, and healing.

(1) www.umassmed.edu/cfm

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