

## Mindfulness

### *How an Ancient Practice Reduces Stress, Improves Health, and Increases Happiness and Compassion*

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The way we perceive stress, and how we react to our perceptions, can determine how stress affects us – physically, mentally, and emotionally.

Imagine two people anticipating a ride on the historic wooden roller coaster in Santa Cruz. The first – let's call her Andrea – is looking forward to the ride. Her friend – let's call him Phil – dreads it, but has come along to keep her company. The ride begins. As their car ratchets steeply upward and precipitously plummets, Andrea – thrilled – is enjoying her adrenaline rush. Phil – terrified – is flooded with the adrenaline and cortisol (stress hormones) that are hardly pleasant for him, will not fully subside for hours, and may recur whenever he remembers the ride.

Over time, the negative stresses we experience – many much worse than a roller-coaster ride! – may harm our bodies' systems, our ability to learn and remember, and our psychological health. Conditions that may be triggered or exacerbated by stress include: heart (including high blood pressure), rheumatologic, autoimmune (e.g. arthritis, fibromyalgia, multiple sclerosis), neurologic, gastrointestinal (e.g. IBS), and chronic pain conditions. Stress also impacts skin problems (e.g. psoriasis, eczema, acne), diabetes, breathing difficulties (e.g. asthma, emphysema), headaches, colds and flu, chronic worry, anxiety, panic, depression, post-traumatic stress reactions, insomnia, fatigue, disordered eating, and addiction to harmful substances.

Twenty-five years of research on Mindfulness-based Stress Reduction demonstrates that breathing, body awareness, yoga, meditation, and attitudinal mindfulness practices – when done consistently – can improve resilience and stress tolerance, and physical and mental health; increase kindness and compassion, happiness and peace of mind; and decrease suffering.

These practices derive from teachings that are 2500 years old. They were modernized and brought into the health care mainstream by pioneering scientist Jon Kabat-Zinn and his colleagues at the University of Massachusetts, beginning in the late 1970s.

### WHAT IS "MINDFULNESS?"

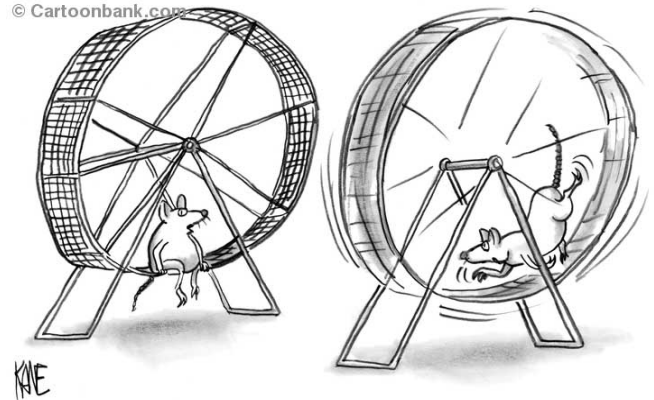
*"The root [of mindfulness] is experiencing the itch as well as the urge to scratch, and then not acting it out."* Pema Chödrön

*"Mindfulness is: paying attention, on purpose, in a particular way, in the present moment, with non-judging awareness."*  
Jon Kabat-Zinn

### Stopping

The world-renowned Vietnamese mindfulness teacher, Thich Nhat Hanh, says that the practice of *stopping* is the first practice of mindfulness. It can help us interrupt and break the unconscious habits that keep us stuck in reactivity and cause suffering to others and ourselves.

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*"I had an epiphany."*

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Learning how to pay attention to what we are doing while we are doing it – noticing what we are experiencing in our bodies, thoughts, and emotions – requires the practice of inner as well as outer *stopping*.

Imagine you're getting ready to ride a horse. As you're climbing into the saddle, the horse takes off at a full gallop, and you struggle to hold on. You don't fully have your seat or the reins. As you hang on for dear life, someone calls out to you from the side of the road, asking "Where are you going?!" You say, "I don't know – ask the horse!"

In this story, the horse represents what we call *habit energy* – the reactive thinking/feeling patterns that are part of our genetic inheritance, and have been established and taken root throughout our lives.

When *habit energy* drives us like that galloping horse, we aren't in control of ourselves. By stopping, we can regain our seat and pick up our (inner) reins. Breathing consciously, briefly focusing attention on *non-thinking* by scanning body sensations, it is possible to interrupt the habit energy, calm and soothe distress, and observe thoughts and emotions with greater objectivity. Mindfulness teaches us to *respond* instead of *reacting* to stress in our lives.

## Conscious Breathing

One mindful stopping practice that can be done anywhere, anytime, is called "conscious breathing."

Try this: Notice where you feel the physical sensations of air as you breathe in and out. [It is often easiest to feel this on the inside of the nostrils – but it's important to find out where *you* feel it, if you can.] Now, say to yourself: "*breathing in, I know I'm breathing in*" as you breathe in, feeling the in-breath; and "*breathing out, I know I'm breathing out*" as you breathe out, feeling the out-breath. Do this three to five times. Now, check: Are you focused here, in the present moment, or in the past, or the future? What are you feeling in your body? What thoughts can you identify? What emotions or moods can you name?

A common misconception about mindfulness is that it should create a state of relaxation and feeling good. Mindfulness practices do build skills in calming and can generate a sense of well-being and peace of mind. However, if the object of our increased awareness is unpleasant, instead of avoiding or fighting or resisting it, we train ourselves to *recognize and allow* ourselves to be aware of what we are experiencing, what we don't like. This helps in building tolerance for whatever presents itself. This is *mindful acceptance*, a cornerstone of mindfulness practice for stress reduction. As the poet Rumi wrote in his poem *The Guest House*:

*This being human is a guest-house  
Every morning a new arrival.  
A joy, a depression, a meanness,  
some momentary awareness comes  
as an unexpected visitor.  
Welcome and entertain them all!  
Even if they're a crowd of sorrows,  
who violently sweep your house  
empty of its furniture,  
still, treat each guest honorably.  
He may be clearing you  
out for some new delight.  
The dark thought, the shame, the malice,  
meet them at the door laughing, and invite them in.  
Be grateful for whatever comes,  
because each has been sent  
as a guide from beyond.*

*Jelaluddin Rumi, translation © 1997 Coleman Barks*

## WHAT IS "MINDFULNESS-BASED STRESS REDUCTION (MBSR)?"

Mindfulness-based Stress Reduction (MBSR) is a program founded in the late 1970s at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center by Jon Kabat-Zinn.

*"Meditation is a way of being, not a technique. Mindfulness meditation is the embrace of any and all mind states, in awareness..."* from *Coming to Our Senses*, by Jon Kabat-Zinn

During eight weekly 2½-hour sessions and an all-day retreat, the program trains participants in mindful breathing, body scanning, yoga, meditation, informal daily awareness practices, and in mindful attitudes and new ways of thinking.

Today, the MBSR program is offered in hospitals and medical centers, mental health settings, corporations, nonprofit organizations, law schools and medical schools, public and private schools (preschools through high schools), colleges and universities, retirement and assisted living centers, government offices, prisons, and retreat centers.

## The Story of MBSR

Jon Kabat-Zinn is an MIT-trained molecular biologist who began practicing and teaching yoga and meditation in the mid-1960s. In the 1970s, after receiving his Ph.D., he worked at several jobs, including in an anatomy lab, instead of going straight into an academic science career.

During this period, on the final day of a silent 10-day meditation retreat, Kabat-Zinn had the idea that he could help people reduce their pain and stress by creating a meditation and yoga program right in the medical center – a radical idea in those days. In 1979, with the support of the head of Internal Medicine at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center, he founded the first (mindfulness-based) Stress Reduction Clinic.

The MBSR program Kabat-Zinn created brought together four kinds of practices: 1) awareness of breathing and physical sensations (body scanning), 2) gentle mindful yoga, 3) mindfulness meditation – sitting and walking, and 4) the cultivation of paradoxical attitudes, such as non-judging awareness, beginner's (or "don't-know") mind, mindful acceptance, mindful patience, letting go/letting be, and trust as self-reliance; and mindful qualities including gratitude, compassion and kindness.

In a world where yoga and meditation have become part of the mainstream, and are now household terms, the combination of these four elements of practice – taught in weekly classes over a 2-month period – is what continues to make MBSR uniquely effective, to this day.

By the early 1980s, Kabat-Zinn was publishing the results of his research on the effects of MBSR on chronic pain and other chronic medical conditions. He published his best-selling first book, *Full Catastrophe Living*, a text for the course, in 1990. A few years later, journalist Bill Moyers included MBSR in his *Healing and the Mind* series, broadcast widely on national public television.

Together with Kabat-Zinn's prescience in grounding the program in research from the beginning, MBSR's enormous success in improving people's health has led to its ever-expanding replication in contexts of all kinds, with widely different populations, in many countries around the world.

## MINDFULNESS FOR PSYCHOLOGICAL HEALTH

Groundbreaking applications of mindfulness to established methods of psychotherapy are making emotional regulation and self-management possible for people with the most challenging psychological conditions. They include: Mindfulness-based Cognitive Therapy for Depression, Relapse Prevention for Substance Use, and Eating Awareness Training; Dialectical Behavior Therapy, and Acceptance and Commitment Therapy. Extensive ongoing research on these approaches demonstrates their remarkable benefits.

## MBSR RESEARCH

Research on the effects of MBSR on illness and health began in the early 1980s. It is part of an exciting and ever-expanding field of scientific exploration into the mind's capacity to influence healing. Researchers at universities across the country and the world are now using brain imaging and many biological tests to identify the effects of mindfulness on our brains, immune systems, emotions, and pretty much every system in our bodies. Hundreds of studies done so far demonstrate that mindfulness practices can: 1) reduce the negative physical and emotional consequences of stress, and the pain and suffering associated with many chronic conditions, and 2) improve stress tolerance, impulse control, physical and mental health, immunity, recovery from surgery, sleep, concentration, test-taking, decision-making, effective communication, mental flexibility, emotional regulation,

psychological resilience, self-efficacy, happiness, kindness and compassion, and personal and work relationships.

To inquire about registering for an MBSR program at PAMF, please call the PAMF Education Division at 650-853-2960.

### Additional Resources

**Books and CDs by Kabat-Zinn:**  
<http://www.mindfulnessstapes.com/>

***Heal Thy Self: Lessons on Mindfulness in Medicine***  
Saki Santorelli

***When Things Fall Apart***  
Pema Chödrön

***The Miracle of Mindfulness***, and ***Peace Is Every Step***  
Thich Nhat Hanh

***Here For Now: Living Well with Cancer Through Mindfulness***  
Elana Rosenbaum

**An annotated bibliography of MBSR research:**  
<http://www.umassmed.edu/Content.aspx?id=42066&linkidentifier=id&itemid=42066>

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## Eat Well Today for a Healthier Tomorrow

The food choices you make every day affect your health—how you feel today, tomorrow, and in the future. The following tips are from MyPyramid, which helps us translate nutritional recommendations into the kinds and amounts of food to eat each day.

- **Make half your grains whole.** Choose whole-grain foods, such as whole-wheat bread, oatmeal, brown rice, and low fat popcorn.
- **Vary your veggies.** Go dark green and orange with your vegetables—eat spinach, broccoli, carrots, and sweet potatoes.
- **Focus on fruits.** Eat them at meals, and at snack time, too. Choose fresh, frozen, canned, or dried, and go easy on the fruit juice.
- **Get your calcium-rich foods.** To build strong bones serve low fat or fat-free milk and other milk products several times a day.
- **Go lean with protein.** Eat lean or low fat meat, chicken, turkey, and fish. Change your tune with more dry beans and peas. Add chick peas, nuts, or seeds to a salad; pinto beans to a burrito; or kidney beans to soup.
- **Change your oil.** We all need oil. Get yours from fish, nuts, and liquid oils such as corn, soybean, canola, and olive oil.
- **Don't sugarcoat it.** Choose foods and beverages that do not have sugar and caloric sweeteners as one of the first ingredients. Added sugars contribute calories with few, if any, nutrients.

Remember to stay physically active.

*Adapted from the USDA Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion*

