



Why *Mindfulness* May Be Right for You

For dealing with stress, this meditative practice can make a difference—and that’s only one of its benefits

By Wendy Haaf

After taking up transcendental meditation in the 1960s, Kathy Smith of London, ON, found herself gradually growing towards a different type of practice, known as mindfulness meditation, which has been an integral part of her life ever since. She’s used it to weather personal challenges and to bypass her inner critic when making art, and today she provides handouts on the subject

to people attending her art classes and her seminars on creating an ideal retirement.

“I talk about my personal stories and the benefits of mindfulness, especially in aging,” Smith says. She says that mindfulness meditation is particularly helpful for coping with loss and life transitions, as well as for letting go of worry.

While the popularity of mindfulness meditation has recently exploded, there are still a lot of

misconceptions about what it is and how much we know about its usefulness in treating various mental and physical health issues.

Being in the Moment

In essence, mindfulness meditation is a kind of training in which you gradually learn to purposefully pay attention to the present moment with acceptance rather than resistance or judgement, often using breathing as a focus and then gently returning to that focus if your thoughts stray. (Other forms of practice may focus on sensations in a part of the body, such as the soles of the feet, and even incorporate movement, such as walking or tai chi, and may vary in duration.)

“I think of it as a kind of physiotherapy for the mind,” says Kate Partridge, a psychologist in London, ON.

The goal is to be able to tune into your inner thoughts and feelings, while not getting swept up in them.

“If we’re aware of what’s arising in the present moment, that offers the opportunity to make conscious decisions instead of unconsciously repeating habitual patterns, whether they’re patterns of emotion, thought, or interpersonal reactivity,” explains Dr. Catherine Phillips, an assistant professor in the Department of Psychiatry at the University of Alberta and founding director of The Mindfulness Institute in Edmonton. Being firmly grounded in the here and now, rather than ruminating on the past or worrying about the future, may also help us to recognize when our thoughts or other reactions are adding to our stress, she says. For instance, since fear and anxiety can amplify physical discomfort, being able to dial back these emotions may help moderate chronic pain.

Evidence from brain imaging studies supports this line of thinking. Some studies have found that mindfulness

turns down activity in the amygdala—the fight-or-flight emotion centre of the brain—and boosts activity in the frontal lobe, which is responsible for rational thinking, says Elena Ballantyne, a clinical neuropsychologist at St. Joseph’s Healthcare Hamilton (ON) and an assistant professor in the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioural Neuroscience at McMaster University. (Other imaging studies hint that mindfulness meditation may also improve the health of brain cells and increase the density of the hippocampus—a region of the brain involved in memory—she says.)

Of course, as with any skill, learning mindfulness meditation takes repetition and regular practise. “It’s a bit like going to the gym—you’re not going to try to lift 200 pounds on your first day,” says Randi-Mae Stanford-Leibold, a Toronto-area mindfulness teacher and author.

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“The purpose is to gently, slowly, but irrevocably train your mind to be able to let go of preoccupations, worries, and reactions,” Partridge says. Over time, this process becomes easier and more automatic.

However, even once you’ve strengthened those mental muscles, practising can be hard work; just as with a runner, some workouts may be effortless, while others may require effort for every step.

“Sometimes mindfulness is marketed almost as a distraction,” Ballantyne says, “but it’s not, necessarily.

Sometimes it’s relaxing and pleasurable, and sometimes it’s painful, because sometimes the present moment sucks. You’re practising skills that allow you to sit with difficult experiences, and not everyone is able to tolerate that right away. People need to be aware that if they’re noticing unpleasant thoughts and feelings and it’s a bit upsetting, that doesn’t mean they’re doing it wrong.”

Managing Expectations

People who adopt mindfulness meditation and maintain daily practise obviously feel that it’s worth the time and effort, whether it’s to be able to think more clearly, to feel less stressed out, or simply to appreciate each moment more fully. However, when it comes to preventing or treating health problems, in many cases, the popularity of mindfulness meditation has leaped ahead of the scientific evidence.

Much of the research that has been done is of questionable quality, due to problems such as poor study design, for example. In addition, the types of practise used often vary from one study to the next, making it difficult to consider the results cumulatively. And further questions arose when researchers used statistical tests to probe the plausibility of the number of trials purportedly demonstrating benefit. “We found that the number of positive claims being made was entirely improbable,” says Brett Thombs, a professor at McGill University’s Faculty of Medicine and a senior investigator at Jewish General Hospital’s Lady Davis Institute for Medical Research.

There is good evidence, however, that a specific type of mindfulness meditation called “mindfulness-based cognitive therapy” is effective at preventing relapse in people who have been treated for recurrent depression.

well-being

There's also evidence that mindfulness meditation may have modest benefits for anxiety, depression, and pain. And in a 2017 report, the American Heart Association stated that studies to date suggest that meditation (although not specifically the mindfulness variety) may be associated with a reduced risk for heart attack; given its low risk for side effects, some might add it to proven heart-health strategies such as a healthy diet and regular exercise.

As to whether mindfulness meditation can help treat other conditions, the jury is still out.

Not for Everyone

If you're interested in trying mindfulness meditation, first think about what you'd like to achieve. For instance, if you aim to change negative thinking patterns, you could try a program that targets that particular issue, while it might be better to forgo mindfulness altogether for conditions such as panic attacks in favour of treatments that have already been proven effective.

And since certain factors may increase the otherwise rare chance of experiencing adverse side effects (such as feelings of anxiety) from mindfulness meditation, Ballantyne recommends that people with a history of trauma, suicidal thoughts, psychosis, or acute and severe alcohol or substance disorders consult a mental health professional before beginning. Partridge recommends finding someone who maintained personal daily meditation practise for a minimum of one year, and who also attends at least one week-long retreat a year.

Personal fit is important, too. "Everybody's learning style is different," says Toronto's Randi-Mae Stanford-Leibold.

"Mindfulness isn't one-size-fits-all," Phillips says. "Starting with two minutes might be appropriate for one person, and 45 minutes for another."

What about apps such as Headspace



and Insight Timer? Phillips says that, while they're no substitute for a live teacher, they at least can provide some guidance to people who don't have access to a teacher. She also says they can be a useful adjunct to classes. "An app is portable, so you can carry a guided meditation with you," she says. "In many instances, you can set a timer to remind you to come back and pay attention to the present moment."

As for the benefits of mindfulness meditation, long-time practitioner Kathy Smith says that, among others, "You become a better listener, because you're not judging or interpreting; you're just being present."

Stanford-Leibold is another who values the practice. "It helps with relationships, how we deal with stress... I think it can just promote a better experience of daily living." Stanford-Leibold, who learned to appreciate the practice during a stint as a crisis counsellor, says mindfulness meditation has also helped her develop self-compassion.

Though the study that McGill University's Brett Thombs worked on called into question some of the claims about mindfulness, he nevertheless says, "I think mindfulness is a fantastic approach to getting the most

out of life. And for people who have the time and patience to do mindfulness meditation, I think there's no question it helps them with stress reduction." ■

Solution to Puzzle #231

5	7	9	2	8	1	6	4	3
3	6	4	7	9	5	8	2	1
2	8	1	3	4	6	9	7	5
9	5	6	4	1	7	2	3	8
4	2	3	9	5	8	1	6	7
8	1	7	6	3	2	4	5	9
6	3	5	8	2	9	7	1	4
7	4	8	1	6	3	5	9	2
1	9	2	5	7	4	3	8	6

Solution to Puzzle #232

8	7	3	6	4	9	1	5	2
1	9	5	3	2	7	4	8	6
6	4	2	1	8	5	3	9	7
3	8	9	5	7	6	2	4	1
4	6	1	9	3	2	5	7	8
2	5	7	8	1	4	6	3	9
7	1	4	2	5	8	9	6	3
9	3	8	4	6	1	7	2	5
5	2	6	7	9	3	8	1	4

Above are the solutions to this month's Sudoku puzzles, [page 63](#).