

Reducing Stress this Holiday Season

Try Using the Mindfulness Approach

In today's go-go, 24/7, constantly checking your smart phone society, it seems we're rarely alone with our thoughts. And nowhere is that more apparent than during the busy holiday season in which shopping for gifts, baking cookies, going to kids' concerts, and attending office parties add to already hectic schedules! As opposed to our minds being too FULL of activity, worries, and concerns, mindfulness is the state of being conscious, aware of, or "mindFUL" of one's surroundings (Schachelmayer, 2016).

It should come as no surprise that employers are establishing mindfulness training programs to enhance employee well-being. A wide range of studies have shown the specific benefits of full awareness for employees, with evidence of a reduction in psychological distress (Migali, McCann, 2018).

The authors note that less-distressed employees are healthier and more content and more likely to be productive and cooperative. Employees become more responsive to stress and better able to communicate their thoughts and emotions to their colleagues. Additional benefits for employers include a reduction in absenteeism and staff turnover (Baicker, Cutler & Song, 2010).

As alluded to earlier, the purpose of mindfulness is an awareness of being "in the moment" and the directions we give our mind to remain fully present in our experiences. To better understand mindfulness and why it is necessary, it is important to know more about it.

Ancient Origins

Mindfulness is actually not "new." It has Buddhist origins that date back 2,500 years or more. It is the realization of today's continued "busy-ness" that is no doubt helping grow the mindfulness movement. Mindfulness programs were initially introduced in the 1970s by Jon Kabat-Zinn, a

molecular biologist at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center. Kabat-Zinn defines mindfulness as the "gentle effort to be continuously present."

He also defines the practice of mindfulness as, "The consciousness that appears when paying deliberate attention, in the present moment and without judgment, to what the experience unfolds moment to moment" (Kabat-Zinn, 2005).

Kabat-Zinn's Stepping Stones about Mindfulness

- *Non-judging* (Not having preconceived notions about others or our surroundings);
- *Patience* (This has always been a virtue, but in a "gotta-have-it" now or "have-to-know-it" society, this seems to be especially true today);
- *Beginner's mind* (This is the idea of looking at things for the first time, not unlike a child);
- *Trust* (Confidence, faith, hope, and assurance – as opposed to disbelief, doubt, uncertainty, and mistrust);
- *Non-striving* ("This is not supposed to be work," says Kabat-Zinn. "If you think it is just one more thing to do, don't do it. Mindfulness involves being, not doing.")
- *Acceptance*; and
- *Letting go*.

What Mindfulness is NOT

The concepts of "meditation" and "mindfulness" are confusing to some people, so here is some clarification. Meditation and mindfulness is NOT:

- Going into a trance or self-hypnosis;
- Attempting to empty your mind;
- Just for spiritual leaders, monks, priests, nuns;
- A technique for relaxation;
- Another form of positive thinking; and
- A reason not to work with mental health or medical professionals – mindfulness can *complement* traditional Western medicine (Schachelmayer, 2016).

Why Mindfulness is Needed

- Fear and anxiety are worthy of our attention.
- Upsetting feelings are not a punishment or a sign of weakness.
- Opening a door to the unknown makes possible a corridor to curiosity.
- We can pay attention to unpleasant situations and thoughts and still be okay.
- Changing mental states through attentive mind-body experiences can transform destructive reactions into peaceful insight and acceptance (Schachelmayer, 2016).

What Mindfulness can do

In today's busy society, we need to find our bearings, to step back. Mindfulness is a great gift for our own lives and in the workplace. Mindfulness offers a viable tool for EAP practitioners in the treatment of fear, anxiety, addiction, stress, trauma, panic, and other conditions that limit individuals in their functions and relationships with themselves and with others (Schachelmayer, 2016).

Moreover, mindfulness-based stress-reduction (MBSR) training is a structured group program that uses mindfulness to alleviate suffering associated with physical, psychosomatic, and psychiatric disorders (Migali, McCann, 2018).

MBSR is based on a systematic procedure that develops increased awareness of moment-to-moment experiences. Meta-analysis results reveal that MBSR can help a wide range of employees, including stressed non-clinical groups – people without a diagnosis of mental illness (Migali, McCann, 2018).

MBSR training also includes formal meditation techniques including:

❖ *Body scanning*, an exercise that alternates between a wide and narrow focus of attention; from concentrating on your little toe all the way through the entire body. The purpose is simply to notice and be aware of your body.

❖ *Conscious breathing*, changing the normal shallow breathing to more relaxed and full breathing. It also involves learning to properly

How is Good Nutrition Mindful?

Our stomach acts like a “second brain.” As a result, the “brain-gut connection” is powerful. Bad food is addictive, just like gambling, drugs, or anything else. Be mindful, pay attention.

Nutritional 9-1-1

❖ *Don't skip breakfast!* You are literally “breaking the fast” you incur from a full night's sleep. Breakfast is the most important meal of the day, but it's not the meal, it's the food you eat. Good breakfast foods include whole-grain cereals, whole fruit, and eggs.

❖ *Add one nutrient-dense food each day for 30 days.* This is as opposed to trying to change your diet too much at one time. Add one banana, then one apple, etc. Don't replace, add to it. Before you know it you will be eating a much healthier diet. You will crowd out the bad stuff (non-nutrient dense).

❖ *Make each meal “right”* – in other words, the proper amount of protein, carbohydrates, and fats at each meal. Consider: Is the amount essential – or not?

❖ *Move it or lose it* – the need for daily exercise. Bad conditioning can even lead to loss of memory, depression, and discontent.

Source: Health Coach Frank Alvarez, Lt. Col. United States Air Force (retired). For more information, visit www.franklynutritious.com.

use the abdomen and diaphragm and increasing oxygen intake.

❖ *Mindfully eating a raisin* exercise, in which participants are asked to intentionally bring an open-minded, beginner's mind to the daily experience of eating a raisin. They are asked to put aside all distractions, turn off the cell phone, and clear awareness on each aspect of this experience (Migali, McCann, 2018).

Mindfulness is an Important Ally ...

❖ ... Balancing distortions, moving from hyperarousal and chronic stress to calm and relaxed attention – an opportunity to “let go”;

❖ ... Reducing fight-or-flight responses, activated stress hormones, immune deficiencies, worsening depression, memory impairment, and possible breakdown of bodily systems that combat diseases;

❖ ... Checking chronic stress that becomes a debilitating barrier frequently associated with depression, panic and anxiety disorders, and mood regulation;

❖ Lessening the dependence on alcohol and drugs that interfere with life (the need for self-medication); and

❖ Restoring balance, needed especially for combat veterans and others suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), traumatic grief, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and individuals with social anxiety (Schachelmayer, 2016).

Mindfulness Offers Potential for Healing

❖ Research cannot explain fully how the practice of mindfulness works, but evidence from *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience* shows a marked decline in the amygdala stress response.

❖ Mindfulness can help individuals better cope with anxiety, PTSD, aggression, social fears, depression, fear-related learning, and many physical, painful, and chronic conditions.

❖ Using mindfulness together with cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), dialectical behavioral therapy (DBT), narrative therapy, psychotherapy, and journaling can help “layer” effective mental health treatment (Schachelmayer, 2016).

Mindfulness Enhances Compassion

Of all the wonderful gifts that mindfulness has to offer, among the greatest is heart qualities such as loving kindness. Cultivating a heart filled with love for others and self is to embrace all of life. We appreciate life even in the pains of suffering through it.

Compassion is seen in our vulnerability as we age and die ... as we find our way in life. We learn to love more softly, with greater tenderness, and at our own pace.

When we see what mindfulness can do for ourselves, we see what it can do for others. But it does not happen easily, it has to be practiced daily.

Mindfulness also Offers ...

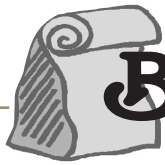
- ... An encouraging opportunity for self-care;
- A gateway to transformational living with endless compassion and unconditional acceptance of self;
- A conduit to health and healing;
- An opportunity for kindness and openheartedness; friendly, “allowing,” non-judging; and
- A greater awareness for mind-body thinking:
 - “I am not my thoughts.”
 - “I am more than my thoughts.”
 - “My thinking does not define me.”
 - “Stay in the moment, utilize all five senses.” (What do you see? What do you feel?)

Summary

Stop *striving* and you will start *thriving*. Remember that everything happens in the present moment.

References

- Baicker, K., Cutler, D., & Song, Z. (2010). Workplace wellness programs can generate savings. *Health Affairs*, 29(2): 1-8.
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- Migali, M., McCann, B. (2018). Increasing employee mindfulness: Our experience in Argentina. *Journal of Employee Assistance*, 48(3): 14-17.
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Tips on Living Mindfully

Take Some “Advice” from Your Pet!

Take time to watch how mindful your pet cat or dog lives. They know how to find time to take a nap on your favorite furniture or near a sunny window or place in a room. Other tips:

- Allow yourself to purr (or leisurely pant).
- Appreciate your own rhythm.
- Enjoy nature. Watch the birds and stalk in tall grass – or play a fun game of fetch.
- Pamper yourself with leisurely grooming.
- Like pets, take time to cuddle.
- Find a cozy sweater or afghan to wrap yourself in.

Turn Off Your Cell Phone! Rest in Silence!

Complete the following questionnaire:

- I have checked my phone _____ times since waking up.
- I have checked my email today _____ times.
- When I woke up this morning I was already thinking about _____.
- On average I interact with social media about _____ daily.

Putting into Practice

❖ Before reading this *Brown Bagger*, I would utilize the mindfulness skills outlined (circle one):

Not at all

A little

On a fairly regular basis

Daily

❖ After reading this *Brown Bagger*, I will commit to using and practicing mindfulness (circle all that apply):

In my own self-care

In my relationships

At work

With clients

Whenever I feel a greater need to be attentive in my being

❖ I would say that I am open to learning more about mindfulness. (Yes or no)

❖ I will allow myself to live in silence and apply mindfulness (circle one):

Less than five minutes per day

Less than twenty minutes per day

Less than forty-five minutes per day

As much as necessary