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## Why Health Psychology Needs to be Mindful About Mindfulness

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The nature of the mind and its intricate relationship with the body has been the question man by his very cogitating nature, has searched for throughout the ages. Cogito ergo sum thus became the first certainty of the individual, upon which he based all his investigations of the self. Traditionally, disease and illness has been approached from the somatopsychic and sensory side; meaning the physical side, rather than from the psychosomatic angle. The mind has an important place within the realm of disease and illness. When calmed by mindfulness meditation and awareness, we are more able to find solutions to health problems and pain.

### Mindfulness is....

Mindfulness is defined as the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment to moment (Kabat-Zinn, 1981). Initially, mindfulness involved cultivating self-awareness and noticing new things in each action we are performing. For example, when we drive, wash, work, learn, watch, feel, act, perform, etc. (Langer, 1989). Langer has separated the idea of mindfulness from meditation. Instead, she defines mindfulness as including situational awareness, sensitivity to changes in the context and control over our thoughts. "Mindfulness doesn't mean simply being optimistic or thinking will make it so" (Langer, 1989). At a secondary level, mindfulness can be achieved through meditation which aims to develop awareness and tuning ourselves into a positive vibe (Kabat-Zinn, 1981). There are two types of awareness: internal and outward. Internal awareness involves attention towards the activities of the mind. Outward awareness involves observation of sense experiences or the activities of the body. Awareness is related to practically every experience in life. The body is here. The mind and senses are active in the body. The faculties, perceptions and expressions of the body and mind are active. Self-awareness refers to what Socrates stated as "know thyself." Shakespeare said "to thine own self be true." There are dormant centres of perception and energy, which we can know and tap into. The aim of mindfulness practice is to become fully aware. Such awareness is not superficial. Even the simple concept of developing physical awareness is very difficult in practice. Full awareness is developed by deepening



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internal awareness. Both types of awareness are required for our everyday life. However, the main problem is that consciousness is either on one or the other mode of awareness which causes distraction and ailments in the mind.

### How is mindfulness related to health?

Today's fast-paced modern society means that we can all experience stress in all facets of life from the work-place to the household, from our graduation day to our retirement day, in all kinds of interactions. The prevalence of anxiety and depression stems from dissatisfaction and imbalance (Teasdale et al., 2000). The research of Teasdale et al. (2000) showed that for patients with three or more previous episodes of depression, MBCT (Meditation based Cognitive therapy) reduced a relapse or recurrence. MBCT offers a promising cost-efficient psychological approach to preventing relapse/recurrence in recurrently depressed people (Goyal et al, 2010; Teasdale et al. 2000). The occurrence of physical, mental and psychosomatic disorders is a clear manifestation of stress exhibiting itself as a concrete form via our bodies. Hence the solution should lie in something practical and substantial. To be healthy, mentally and physically, one must be aware of the body-mind complex, its needs and requirements, just as a car requires a good driver; as well as servicing, oiling, petrol, grease, tyre adjustment and so on. Mindfulness is designed to help people maintain our body-mind vehicle in top running condition for as long as possible so that life can be fulfilling and joyful. The three main system-

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atic reviews that have looked at the effectiveness of MBCT on depression and anxiety disorders indicate significant reductions in relapse rates (Ivanovski & Malhi, 2007; Toneatto & Nguyen, 2007; Arias, Steinberg, Banga, & Trestman, 2006). However, as one commentator has noted (Pilkington, 2007) such reviews do not always reach the same exact conclusions. The reviews show us trends, but a detailed reading highlights differences.

The western tradition of humanistic psychology examined by Maslow, Jung and Rogers has highlighted the presence of a positive potential within the self that needs to be realized and subsequently developed. The experiences of mindfulness also brings to us the fact that the path of evolution to self-realization does not lie in the outside world, but within our own being waiting to be discovered. The individual can fulfil his/her aspirations by supplementing their efforts with the practice of mindfulness. The practices of yoga in mindfulness interventions called 'asanas' mean the postures that we are comfortable in, and those which develop in us, a heightened state of awareness. These practices have already been validated scientifically for their profound benefits on the physical, mental and emotional well-being of man. Individuals with persistent pain or stress are more likely to benefit from intensive meditation (Godfrin & Van Heeringen, 2010). An argument against mindfulness is that it is effortful and difficult and it involves a lot of extra energy. However, such a perception is false. Mindfulness is simply thinking and noticing new things. Mindfulness can play a vital role in therapists' and healthcare professionals' performance as it allows them to avoid making mistakes. As a result, for obvious reasons, it can have a lot of applications in both the delivery of care as well as the treatment of individuals (Fortney & Taylor, 2010). Interestingly, there is evidence that we do not actually learn from our mistakes (Jacobson & Petrie, 2009). Mindfulness is a way of reducing errors either by experiencing the same event in a different way or by noticing changes in their environment (Carson & Langer, 2006). Mindfulness prompts us to: 1) Focus on accepting new things that come to our perception. This means participating actively in the stimulus and accepting them with awareness without judgment. 2) Focus on context by creating new categories. Mindfulness creates sensitivity to new contexts, differences and perspectives (Langer, 1989).

**Meditation and health**

One main component of mindfulness is meditation. Meditation implies relaxation both mentally and physically at a level very few people experience even when they are sleeping. Through meditation the mind is

trained to cure the ailment. The first step is to become aware of the inner processes of the mind and body, and thus one can direct energies where they are most needed. This is achieved in various stages. Individuals are trained to quieten the mind and relax the tensions, so that one can begin to see just what is going on around us. Individuals should become aware of the conditioning that causes us to react to pain in certain ways (Varni, 1981). Mindfulness meditation generally includes observation of thoughts, awareness of breathing and bodily sensations while sitting. The purpose is to observe without judgement or hold on to thoughts or perceptions with detachment. Mindfulness is often described as the process of being attentive to one's experiences. This practice of being mindful may also extend into daily activity, as one adheres to dispassionate observation of thoughts and actions in order to be more fully present in the moment and not overwhelmed by past turmoil (Mills & Farrow, 1981). Through this process people unwind easier after work and avoid ruminations on work problems. The practice of mindfulness takes place in what psychologists and neuroscientists generally call the waking state of consciousness. During meditation awareness is always present, unlike sleep in which we don't have control of our thoughts. According to Baer's review (2003), mindfulness-based interventions are helpful in a variety of mental health problems and psychological ailments. The review also suggests that many people who enrol in mindfulness-based programs will complete them, in spite of high demands for homework practice. As we progress, gaining relaxation and improving health, meditative discipline teaches an individual to sense the purpose of pain, to 'wake up' in the spiritual sense. We see that most of our pain is caused by lack of awareness and basic ignorance (Zeidan, Johnson, Diamond, David, & Goolkasian, 2010). Using meditative awareness, we develop greater insights into our own weaknesses and failings as well as into the workings of life. We become more skilful. Deeper meditative insight teaches detachment and forbearance, especially by withdrawing the mind from the senses. This frees the mind from dependence on medication for every little pain in our lives. We become more willing and more able to stay with pain, to try to see into it, its cause, and what it is trying to teach us.

**Some basic steps in cultivating mindfulness**

It very common for an individual's awareness to appear in a negative way. A simple exercise to experience mindfulness is through sense awareness. For example, at the start of your week begin with focusing on hearing. Try to listen to the sounds in each moment without effort to find their source by becoming the



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observer. Then continue on Tuesday by trying to watch all new things with concentration. Try to observe people in the bus, street, supermarket etc., without getting involved in any situation. Continue with the sense of taste by tasting mindfully each meal and touch by feeling anything that you touch. Additionally, another helpful technique is to devote 20 minutes at the end of each day by becoming still and non-doing. Try to reflect on the thoughts that pass by and then let them go. Try to remain the observer, without letting any thought distract you. Imagine that you are watching a movie—thoughts come and let go one after the other without influence on you.

## Concluding remarks

In the light of the above, mindfulness meditation has enormous potential for its use as a tool by therapists, practitioners and researchers. Mindfulness skills can help patients reduce self critical chatter, find clarity of mind and act rather than react (Wilkinson-Tough, Bocci, Thorne, & Herlihy, 2010). Mindfulness techniques could be a powerful tool for therapists and doctors as its effective applications have already been explored and justified. The recent systematic review of Mars & Abbey (2010) show that Mindfulness based meditation therapies have produced significant results across a wide range of non-clinical and patient populations, including those who are suffering from depression, stress, burnout, and severe pain. For patients suffering from any type of disease, the initial but most difficult step in a disease is self acceptance and non-striving which are the most important components to overcome. This step involves the state of not doing anything, just simply accepting that things are happening in the moment just as they are supposed to. For doctors, awareness could be a very powerful tool to reorientate their daily activities. Through awareness their relationships with patients could be improved and refreshed as well as their capacity to provide compassion and strength. Mindfulness-based skills are becoming an essential tool for therapists who want to support greater well-being, wise action and a sustained sense of greater mental and emotional freedom. Nowadays, health service organisations globally are adopting mindfulness-based approaches to therapy, patients and employee well-being. Training patients and therapists to be mindful can harness their energies for creative and constructive purposes. ■

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