

Mindfulness is a Popular Buzzword: What Can it Mean for You?

The term “mindfulness” has become an ubiquitous buzzword in psychology the past two decades or so. Its prevalence has extended to researchers, clinicians and clients alike. Scholarly articles related to mindfulness have jumped from less than 80 in 1990 to over 3,000 in May 2012. And clients frequently enter my office asking specifically for mindfulness techniques. Mindfulness and acceptance-based therapies comprise what’s come to be known as the “third wave” of psychology (after behaviorism and cognitive behavioral therapy [CBT]) and have a rightful seat at the psychological table along with psychodynamic theory, CBT, family systems theory, and an array of other modalities.

Why has mindfulness gained so much traction recently? I believe there are two inter-related reasons. The first is the globalization of the world and the resultant merging of Western psychological theory and Eastern ideals (which mindfulness is derived from). Mindfulness is a core tenet of Buddhist philosophy, and as Buddhism continues its Western spread, it’s only natural that more Westerners will adopt its practices. The other reason? It works; mindfulness has been clinically proven to be correlated with any number of psychological and health variables including (but far from limited to): stress, anxiety, depression, disordered eating, substance abuse, and an array of positive psychological factors such as life satisfaction and fulfillment. It stands to reason that such a powerful tool would find its way into our Western psychological discussion.

Mindfulness practices are generally considered to have derived from early Buddhist sanghas in India and current-day Nepal in the fifth century B.C. However, a survey of other spiritualities indicates that these practices exist, in some form, in many of the world’s current religions. And, in fact, some of these contemplative practices actually pre-date Buddhism. Examples include Chinese Taoist practices, Hindu Yogic techniques, and Western views on holistic health. In addition, mindfulness tenets can be found in psychoanalytic depth theory, which has roots in Jewish Kabbalistic practices. Thus, these practices belong not only to Buddhists, but a majority of the world’s population. These techniques indeed are cross-cultural and cross-spiritual discipline.

Having said all that, what is mindfulness? The expert to answer that question best would be Jon Kabat-Zinn, Ph.D., who is most responsible for the implementation of these techniques on Western soil. Kabat-Zinn created Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) in Massachusetts in the 1970’s and 1980’s. MBSR is a program designed to decrease stress for chronic pain sufferers and is the first, and most impactful application of mindfulness in the West. It has been adapted to treat anxiety, depression, disordered eating, and substance abuse relapse prevention. Kabat-Zinn refers to mindfulness, simply and elegantly, as “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally.” Thus, mindfulness is an accepting and acutely aware relationship to one’s current experience.

For a more nuanced understanding of mindfulness, Kabat-Zinn proposes 7 attitudinal factors, presented below:

1. Non-judging. Kabat-Zinn claims that mindfulness is cultivated “by assuming the stance of an impartial witness to your own experience.” This requires an awareness of the “constant stream of judging” and “categorizing... our

experience" which "locks us into mechanical reactions that we are not even aware of and that often have no objective basis at all." Thus, in order to have a more mindful, direct contact with reality, an attitude of non-judgment must be cultivated.

2. Patience. Kabat-Zinn presents the importance of patience as a way to stay present-focused. He states that impatience typically appears when one is feeling agitated or frightened, or because one has been practicing for some time with no observable results. Impatience then typically serves to direct one's mind towards the future, the past, or some other way of separating from the present reality. However, the mindful practitioner allows those experiences through patience, because they are in fact present. This is related to the first attitudinal factor of non-judgment.

3. Beginner's mind. This means, according to Kabat-Zinn, cultivating a mind "that is willing to see everything as if for the first time." He claims that this attitude allows one to be free of expectations based on previous experiences or a static view of oneself. Kabat-Zinn proposes that, in order to live mindfully, this attitude should be utilized in every aspect of daily life, so that one is able to see people, problems, mental events, and nature with "a clear and uncluttered mind."

4. Trust. Trust in this case means developing a basic trust in oneself and one's feelings. This includes, according to Kabat-Zinn, following one's own intuition and not relying solely on teachings, or a teacher, to promote mindful or healthy behavior. However, he notes that "the more you cultivate this trust in your own being, the easier you will find it will be to trust other people more and see their basic goodness as well." Thus, when one is more grounded in their experience (including their intuition), trust in people's basic goodness comes naturally.

5. Non-striving. Kabat-Zinn states that mindfulness is actually an act of "non-doing," unlike much of our regular experience, and that it "has no goal other than for you to be yourself. The irony is that you already are." Striving is typically paired with a wish for a different reality (for example, a meditator hoping to achieve a state of elevated relaxation). However, that intention itself introduces an alternate reality (one in which the meditator has in fact accomplished this relaxed state) and that implies that the present reality is not sufficient. This distracts one from what is really occurring, and undermines the cultivation of mindfulness. In contrast, non-striving allows one to be present with their current circumstances.

6. Acceptance. "Acceptance means seeing things as they actually are in the present. If you have a headache, accept that you have a headache." Acceptance, of even difficult to confront realities, allows a more direct contact with the present. And if one attends to the present, Kabat-Zinn states "we can be sure of one thing, namely that whatever we are attending to in this moment will change, giving us the opportunity to practice accepting whatever it is that will emerge in the next moment."

7. Letting go. Kabat-Zinn equates letting go to non-attachment, and claims it is fundamental to mindfulness practice. This is related to non-striving, but it is more present-oriented rather than future-oriented. It involves putting aside the tendency to indulge in some aspects of experience while rejecting others. He states that everyone practices this attitude every night in falling asleep. One lets go, albeit temporarily, of the mind and body in order to go to sleep.

Sounds great, right? The question then becomes, how does one start to cultivate this accepting and aware attitude? There are literally dozens of exercises and techniques to promote this non-judgmental awareness of experience. I'll present one here in this space, along with some links to guided meditations. Additionally, working with someone who is well-versed in these techniques, either a therapist or spiritual guide, can be of great help. This script (adapted from *Teach Yourself*

Resilience by D. Robertson) walks you through a basic meditation. I recommend reading it, getting a general sense of it, then trying it for 5 or 10 minutes and making it your own.

Step One: Mindfulness of the Here and Now

Pause for a few moments to become more mindful of yourself. Take a step back from your thoughts and allow yourself to acknowledge and accept any unpleasant feelings you might be having, such as tension, pain, or anxiety. Be aware of yourself as the detached observer of your thoughts and feelings. Throughout life you've experienced literally millions of different thoughts and feelings and observed many different things. Your current thoughts and feelings are transient, just what you happen to be experiencing right now, sooner or later your attention will move on to other things, and then sometimes it may return to these experiences again.

For now, just be aware of what you're currently experiencing, from moment to moment, without evaluating it, analyzing it, or interpreting it. You can have your eyes open or closed, be standing or sitting, it really doesn't matter. Just allow yourself to pause and become mindful of your experience for a few moments. If your mind wanders, that's fine, just acknowledge the fact and bring your awareness patiently back to the exercise you're doing.

Step Two: Grounding Attention in the Breathing

Now gradually narrow your focus of attention on to the sensations of your breathing. Don't try to change your breathing, don't try to stop it from changing, just breathe naturally. Accept what your breathing feels like and make room for it to do whatever it wants, let go of any desire to change or control it. Notice the sensations of your breathing, the rise and fall of your belly, perhaps movements in your chest, or even your shoulders. Become aware of even the smallest sensations that accompany your breathing, feelings you may not have noticed before. Keep paying attention to your breathing to help ground your attention in the reality of the present moment.

If you're aware of any unpleasant feelings anywhere in your body, just allow yourself to accept them patiently and let them come and go as they please, or to remain the same. Let go completely of any struggle against them and instead study them from a more detached perspective. Combine awareness of the breath with awareness of the body by imagining your breath continually passing right through that part of your body where the unpleasant feelings are happening. Use your breath to centre your attention on that part of your body for a while. As you breathe in and out, continue to actively accept those sensations and allow yourself to fully experience them. Let go completely of any struggle against them.

Step Three: Expanding Awareness throughout the Body

Now gradually begin to expand your awareness beyond those sensations. Continue to be aware of your breathing and any part of your body that you've been attending to but, in addition, allow your awareness to begin spreading through the rest of your body, throughout the trunk of your body, your arms, your legs, your neck and head. Become aware of your whole body as one, and continue to accept any unpleasant sensations you're experiencing but also begin to notice what else you're experiencing, more and more, progressively widening the sphere of your attention. Not trying to avoid or control unpleasant experiences but rather expanding beyond them.

Now gradually spread your awareness out further beyond your body and into the room around you, where you are and what you're doing right now. Continue to notice how you're using your body and mind as you look slowly around you. As you finish the exercise and begin interacting with the external world and perhaps other people, take that sense of mindfulness and self-awareness with you into your environment and any tasks at hand. If you continue to notice any unpleasant sensations, that's fine, just accept them, let go of any struggle against them, and gently expand your attention beyond them to the world around you and the way you're interacting with life as you move into action.

In addition, here are some links to a wonderful guided meditation, in two parts, which is based on the acceptance of thoughts and feelings:

Part 1: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YW-TDOgstSE>

Part 2: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jn3D_Biilqc&feature=fvwrel

As one becomes more established in these practices, the awareness and acceptance exemplified in these activities start to permeate into life off the cushion. Thoughts are seen as merely thoughts, emotions as emotions, and these temporary mental events become disempowered. These temporary mental events are seen for what they are: normal, impermanent parts of everyday experience. As such, one doesn't identify with them, and sadness doesn't become depression, stress doesn't become distress, and anxiety doesn't become debilitating. It's easy to see why these practices are developing such a following.

Dr. Kevin Metz has been trained in depth in mindfulness and acceptance based theories and techniques, to include Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy and Insight Dialogue, in addition to others. He has extensive experience incorporating these concepts into his individual psychotherapy with clients. Dr. Metz has also facilitated meditation groups and led meditation-oriented outreach presentations to the community.

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