

Some Of The Benefits Of Mindfulness

By Chris Walsh from www.mindfulness.org.au

1. **Development of a stronger “Observing Self”**
2. **It can be applied in a variety of settings..**
3. **We can see thoughts as “Just thinking” without feeding or fighting them**
4. **We can see the temporary nature of sensations, feelings and thoughts.**
5. **Mindfulness allows covert desensitization to negative thoughts and feelings to occur spontaneously.**
6. **More Creative Solutions are then able to emerge spontaneously**
7. **An Increased Appreciation of Life**
8. **Reduced Suffering**
 - *Physical Pain*
 - *Emotional Pain, Compulsions and Addictions*
9. **Improved Health**
 - *Improved Mood*
 - *Improved Immune Function*

Introduction

Mindfulness interventions have been demonstrated to be beneficial for a number of psychological and physical conditions such as chronic pain, depression, anxiety, addictions and personality disorder. (Baer 2003) It has also been shown that after only eight weeks of practice that practitioners have positive changes in the brain function and immune response (Davidson 2003)

Many people notice the benefits of mindfulness in their day to day lives. In fact mindfulness is now being researched as a tool to enhance teachers' abilities. www.cultivatingemotionalbalance.org

Upon reflection (often in psychotherapy) we can notice certain destructive repeating patterns in our lives, but we are usually powerless to change them at this stage. Below are described some of the beneficial effects of mindfulness that help us address this problem

We can see how these beneficial components can operate by considering an example.

A man getting irrationally angry at his partner when she spends time away with her old girlfriends.

1. Development of a stronger “Observing Self” or “Witness”

Through mindfulness the practitioner becomes less identified with the contents of consciousness. Segal, Williams & Teasdale (2002 p.38, 39) name this process as "decentering". In metaphorical terms it is as if you are watching the stream of consciousness rather than swimming in it and being buffeted by its eddies and currents. As we do this we begin to notice smaller and smaller component patterns. This depends on the capacity to observe ourselves which is strengthened by our mindfulness practice.

The feelings of anxiety, a tightening in the chest with constriction of breathing.

The thoughts: "She is going to leave me" "I always end up alone"

Images of being left in hospital by his parents when he was four years old.

The transition of anxiety into anger with all the accompanying changes in physical sensations and thoughts.

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Through this mindful observational process we can identify smaller and more manageable patterns.

2. It can be applied in a variety of settings.

Unlike relaxation techniques mindfulness can be developed to the point where it can be practised in the middle of stressful situations. While being mindful we can still remain alert and respond appropriately to the situation at hand. Normally in these situations we regress to a reactive and unskilful automatic pilot.

So this man can be mindful when a memory of a fight with his partner appears in his mind or even when they are actually fighting.

3. We can see thoughts as “Just thinking” without feeding or fighting them.

So in our example this man may find himself getting angry with his partner despite his best intentions, even though he knows his anger is unjustified and totally out of proportion. So he is trapped in automatic pilot and feels out of control. This happens to all of us from time to time.

When we practise mindfulness of the body or the breath in this situation we are already doing something different. We are bringing awareness into the situation. That simple act weakens the power of automatic pilot (or as they say in Buddhist literature "habitual tendencies") so we see our thoughts as just thinking and our experiences as just experiences without reacting to them.

Sogyal Rinpoche (1992 The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying. p123) states “The practice of mindfulness defuses our negativity, aggression, and turbulent emotions....Rather than suppressing emotions or indulging in them, here it is important to view them, and your thoughts, and whatever arises with an acceptance and generosity that are as open and spacious as possible.”

4. We can see the temporary nature of sensations, feelings and thoughts.

This allows for the practice described by Allan Marlatt as “Urge Surfing” which he uses as part of “Relapse Prevention”. Often trying to change things compounds the problems for example when someone tries to get rid of unpleasant feelings by taking substances. Also the internal struggle to put something out of your mind usually results in increased tension and a rebound phenomenon where the avoided thought feeling returns even stronger (Wenzlaff et al 1991)

5. Mindfulness allows covert desensitization to negative thoughts and feelings to occur spontaneously.

Often we try to distract ourselves from unpleasant thoughts and feelings. This is a form of avoidance. Behavioural theory and research shows that avoidance creates more problems. Mindfulness allows us to stay present to the unpleasant thought or feeling for its natural duration without feeding or repressing it. During mindfulness practice we get countless opportunities to do this until our anxiety and desire to avoid naturally extinguishes. (Breslin 2002)

So in our example, the jealous husband may be able to notice his anxiety with it's associated thoughts and physical sensations without trying to distract himself or without trying to relieve it by controlling his wife's behaviour.

Often we try to distract ourselves from the unpleasant physical sensations by escaping into our thoughts - even worrying thoughts. So staying with the unpleasant physical sensations can be especially important. This does not just apply to the emotion of fear or anxiety. It applies just as much with any other associated emotions such as shame, anger, sadness or distress. So we replace fear and avoidance of the physical sensations with curiosity about their exact nature -the quality, the temperature, the location, the borders the nature of the sensations - How it changes with inspiration and expiration and how it changes and moves as time passes. In this way the phobia of our own internal responses abates.

6. More creative solutions are then able to emerge spontaneously

As the grip of automatic pilot on the mind is relaxed we also become freer to act skilfully. Our unconscious mind can then process information differently and present us with a completely novel and effective response. In Buddhist literature this is called "spontaneously arising wisdom".

In our example the jealous husband may find himself making a joke of his own anxiety rather than flipping into anger. In this way he is able to reconnect to his wife as an adult rather than as the needy child who is overwhelmed by his fear -an action he would have been very unlikely to have constructed and executed successfully through conscious effort. By the time he would have thought of it, the moment for action would have passed.

Although this can sound quite ethereal and mysterious, it can be at least partly explained by modern understandings and research.

Firstly we are more able to access embodied cognition when less absorbed in our mental chatter.

Many psychologists are now realizing that our thinking does not just occur just through manipulation of abstract symbols by the mind. **Our thinking is in fact embodied.** We feel our thoughts. Studies of robotics have shown how disembodied representation is incredibly inefficient. To know more about this, go to: <http://www.iep.utm.edu/e/embodcog.htm>

This shows up in team sports like football when an athlete suddenly does a skilful move that he has never done before in the midst of a high pressure game. Automatic pilot obviously gets in the way of this process. Mindfulness clears the way for it to occur.

This process has also been identified in the Western philosophical tradition of existential phenomenology. The process of mindfulness is very similar to the process of "Phenomenological Reduction" (epoché) where our assumptions about the nature of the world are set aside and novel phenomenological insights emerge with a sense of astonishment. (Fink, Eugen 1970). In the Christian tradition this is often described as "grace" and is associated with the idea of the Holy Spirit.

Secondly we are less vulnerable to the process of mindless emotional contagion. Emotional contagion has now been clarified as unconscious and very subtle synchronization of facial expressions, voices, and postures with others in the immediate environment (Hatfield, Cacioppo and Rapson 1993; Hsee, C.K., Hatfield, E., and Chemtob, C. 1992). This can be very enjoyable when we are sharing positive emotions. However it can also mean we feed off each other's shame, anger, fear or depression.

There is also now been identified a neurological process that supports this mutual imitation. Mammals including humans have a system of "mirror neurons" These fire both when we perform a particular action and when we perceive someone else perform that same action. (Rizzolatti, G., Fogassi, L., Gallese, V. 2001).

The Emotional Contagion Scale (Doherty 1997 http://jom-emit.cfpm.org/1998/vol2/marsden_p.html) has been recently developed and validated to assist further research in this area.

Mindfulness allows us to stay present to the other person without being caught up in their emotional responses through contagion. This also frees us to respond in a wiser way.

Often this spontaneously arising wisdom manifests in a very simple and subtle way. We just stay present to the situation and our breath without zoning out. Instead of acting in our habitual unskilful ways we simply stay still and silent. Often this very humble act can interrupt escalation of destructive emotions by dampening emotional contagion. In this way it can create a very positive outcome for all concerned.

7 An Increased Appreciation of Life

A person with high base-line attentiveness finds, in general, all life activities to be more fulfilling. Intrinsically pleasant experiences (food, music, sexuality, etc.) are vastly more intense and satisfying simply because one is more fully "in the moment." Furthermore, ordinary, banal experiences (washing dishes, driving to work, social conversation, etc.) take on a quality of extraordinary vibrancy and fascination. Boredom becomes a thing of the past.

8 Reduced Suffering

Physical Pain

Dealing with pain from illness or injury becomes a major issue for most people sometime in their lives. Indeed for millions of chronic pain victims, it is *the* issue of every moment of their lives. When analgesics and medical treatment cannot mitigate the pain, what option is left? Must one be subject to meaningless, abject suffering? Absolutely not. It has been clinically demonstrated that in states of sufficiently high concentration, pain, even very acute pain, can be dissolved into a kind of moving energy. This greatly diminishes ones suffering in the moment.

More importantly, when one learns to experience pain in this way, one actually gets a sense of being empowered and even nurtured by it. Thus, meditation skills provide not merely a mode of pain management, but allow one to experience pain as deeply meaningful in the sense of contributing to personal growth and empowerment.

Emotional Pain, Compulsions and Addictions

What is true for physical pain is also true for emotional pain such as fear, grief, anger, jealousy, shame, etc.

Using mindfulness skills, one can clearly detect and discriminate the mental images, internal words and body sensations that constitute the negative emotion as they arise moment by moment. By "deconstructing" the emotion in this way, one becomes less caught up while at the same time allowing the emotion to flow without suppression.

The same skills can be applied to overcoming negative habits and compulsive behaviors such as alcohol, tobacco and drug abuse, eating disorders and so forth, "staying with" the unwholesome urge until it weakens and passes.

Furthermore, the mindfulness itself produces a kind of "intrinsic high" which can replace the unhealthy high of substance and alcohol addiction.

9. Improved Health

1. States of high attentiveness and deep relaxation involve not only the mind but also affect the body and therefore impact one's health. Brain alpha waves increase, skin conductivity decreases and the metabolism becomes more efficient.
2. Mindfulness helps people be more in contact with and hence more responsive to their bodies.
3. Heightened attentiveness also greatly increases the "high" associated with running and other forms of health-promoting exercises, thus making exercise easier and more appealing.
4. There is improved functioning of the immune system in regular mindfulness practitioners. Davidson (2003) et al have shown an increased response of antibodies to flu vaccination in people who have been practising mindfulness regularly for eight weeks.
5. The same study showed an increase of blood flow to the left frontal cortex of the brain in these mindfulness practitioners after the 8 week course. This change is associated with increased optimism and sense of well being.

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