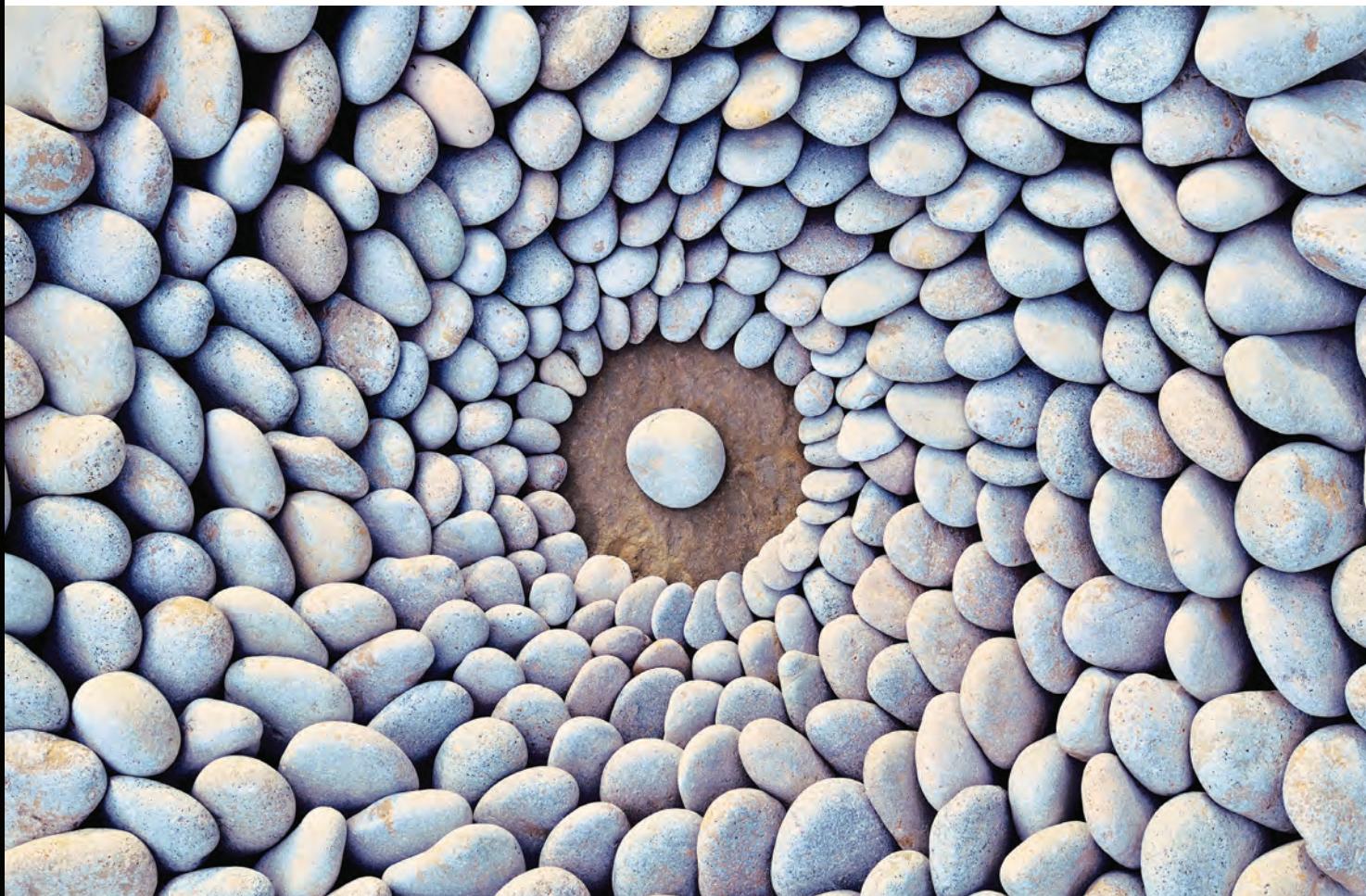




Mindfulness meditation as medication

Even most traditional doctors in the UK now believe their patients could improve their health with meditation. **Edo Shonin, William Van Gordon, and Mark D. Griffiths** of the Psychological Wellbeing and Mental Health Research Unit of the UK's Nottingham Trent University report.



Until recently, it was practically unheard of that doctors and other front-line health professionals would even consider prescribing their patients' meditation rather than medication. However, according to a report by the UK's Mental Health Foundation, 72 per cent of general practitioners in the UK now believe that patients can improve their health by practising meditation. The most popular meditation technique to be used in research and healthcare settings is mindfulness meditation. Mindfulness is the practice of cultivating a full and open awareness of the present moment. Research has shown that we have a tendency to not be 'fully present' and this can

sometimes leave us feeling that life is racing by too fast. If we spend most of our time dwelling on the past and/or trying to rush towards the future, then we miss out on what is happening 'here and now'. Given that the past is history, and the future is fantasy, the present moment is the only place where we can truly experience and appreciate the wonders of life. So how do we introduce mindfulness into our daily lives and make sure that we stay in touch with the present moment?

MINDFULNESS EXPLAINED

Mindfulness has been used by Buddhist practitioners for over 2,500 years. Although you'd be forgiven for thinking that 'mindfulness' means

that we should be 'full of mind', this doesn't quite capture the essence of mindfulness practice. Being 'full of mind' basically means that there is a lot of mental exertion (as well as a lot of brain noise and chatter). Having a 'full up' mind all of the time can be stressful and tiring and it doesn't leave room for wholesome thoughts to grow and flourish. Mindfulness helps to create space in the mind so that we can observe and nourish our being more fully.

Life is an extraordinarily rare and fragile gift. If we are fortunate, it may last for 100 years. Each and every moment contained within those 100 years is profoundly unique. Nobody else will experience that moment and

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it will never arise again. It was born, it lived, and it died – gone forever. If we are not fully aware of all that we see, hear, smell, taste, and touch in each and every moment then maybe we have to conclude that we are not fully alive.

The Pali word for mindfulness is ‘sati’ which means ‘to remember’ – in the sense that we should remember to be aware of all that we experience in the present moment. Given the present moment is made up of countless happenings and occurrences, the Buddhist teachings on mindfulness outline four key areas that can be used as focus points for our concentration: (i) the body (starting with the breath), (ii) feelings, (iii) thoughts and mental processes, and (iv) the environment around us. Basically then, the best way to practice mindfulness is to start by becoming aware of our breathing, then expand our meditative awareness to encompass the body, then feelings and thoughts, and finally the environment in which we find ourselves.

“ The trick is to not create a separation between your mindfulness practice and the rest of your life

THE HEALTH BENEFITS OF MINDFULNESS

Research studies have shown that over 80 per cent of British adults believe that modern-day pressured lifestyles lead to stress and illness and that their health can be improved by slowing down and learning to be mindful of the present moment. According to the latest research findings, mindfulness meditation can be beneficial for improving a wide variety of health conditions including stress, anxiety, depression, chronic pain, eating



Meditation improves intellectual functioning and alleviates depression.

disorders, and even problems relating to sexual performance. In fact, some forms of mindfulness meditation are now recommended by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence for the treatment of specific types of depression. In addition to its medical benefits, scientific research has also shown that mindfulness can improve intellectual functioning and memory capacity – including in school-age children. Engaging in mindfulness regularly has also been shown to improve people’s spiritual wellbeing as well as their overall sense of purpose in life.

FIVE TIPS FOR PRACTISING MINDFULNESS EFFECTIVELY

1. Adopt a suitable meditation posture: The first thing to think about when starting to practice

mindfulness meditation is to adopt a suitable meditation posture. The most important things to keep in mind are that your posture is stable and that you are comfortable (because a good physical posture leads to a good mental posture). Some people prefer to sit cross-legged on a meditation cushion whilst others prefer sitting upright on a chair. It’s simply a matter of personal preference – either position can work well. In an eight-week group mindfulness program we developed called Meditation Awareness Training (MAT), the analogy of a mountain is used to help participants understand the most appropriate posture for meditation. A mountain has a definite presence, it is upright and stable, yet at the same time it is without tension and does not have to strain to maintain

its posture – it is relaxed, content, and deeply-rooted in the earth.

2. Follow the breath

As part of mindfulness practice, observing the breath is used as a kind of ‘meditative anchor’ to help with concentration and with maintaining an open-awareness of the present moment. Being fully aware of the in-breath and out-breath helps to ‘tie the mind’ to the present moment and to slow down our thought processes. If you have difficulty concentrating, then try counting the breath from one to 10, and then back to one. Alternatively, quietly guide yourself with phrases such as: “Breathing in, I am fully aware of my in-breath; breathing out, I am fully aware of my out-breath.” “Breathing in, I am here; breathing out, I am now.” Or “Breathing in, there is nowhere I need to be; breathing out, I am already home...” It is very important not to force your breathing – let the breath follow its natural course and allow it to calm and deepen on its own.

3. Carry your meditation cushion with you

Just as conditions such as the sun, rain, and nutrients are required for a seed to grow into a blossoming flower, meditative development requires us to make the ‘right effort’ at all times. Sometimes people try to cram in their mindfulness practice with all of the other activities of their lives and they make the excuse that they don’t have time to practice. However, this approach often leads to a stressful attitude towards mindfulness and for some people the practice can quickly start to become a chore. Therefore, the trick is to not create a separation between your mindfulness practice and the rest of your life. In fact, it’s when you blow out your candles and stand up from your meditation cushion (or chair) that the practice

“ Engaging in mindfulness regularly has also been shown to improve people’s spiritual wellbeing as well as their overall sense of purpose in life

of mindfulness really begins. While sitting or writing at the computer, tidying-up at home, cooking the dinner, or doing the weekly food shop, do your best to be mindful and to remember to observe your breathing. Real meditators are those who can practice ‘on the job’ and this is why some meditation teachers tell their students to carry their meditation cushions with them at all times. Try not to battle with yourself – make the present moment your home and simply bring your awareness to whatever you are doing.

4. Make use of mindfulness reminders

Based on our experience of teaching and researching MAT, those that best manage to integrate their mindfulness practice into everyday life tend to be the ones who show the greatest improvements in overall levels of psychological and spiritual wellbeing. One helpful way of maintaining mindfulness during everyday activities is to use ‘*mindfulness reminders*’. An example is an hour chime (e.g., from a wrist-watch or desktop computer), that, upon sounding, can be used as a trigger to gently bring the mind back to the present moment and to the natural flow of the in-breath and out-breath.

5. Have realistic expectations and keep practicing

Finally – as with many things in life – it is not uncommon for people to begin practising mindfulness enthusiastically, but then give up as soon as a minor difficulty is encountered. One reason is unrealistic expectations. Mindfulness is not a quick-fix solution. Long-lasting spiritual and personal growth require perseverance and a great deal of practice. Thinking that mindfulness meditation can immediately solve all of your problems or change your life overnight is a mistake. However, just as all effects follow a cause, the day-in day-out integrating of all aspects of your life with present-moment awareness will gradually begin to soften the conditioned mind and – over time – allow rays of tranquillity and insight to slowly break through. When correctly practiced, mindfulness is extremely hard work and requires us to be patient and compassionate with ourselves. However, mindfulness also requires us to thoroughly enjoy life no matter what situation we find ourselves in. The practice of accepting and getting to know our mind and true selves during mindfulness meditation – including those parts of our character that we’d sometimes prefer didn’t exist – can be really hard work, but it should also be a lot of fun! 

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