

MINDFULNESS & MINDFULNESS BREATHING

By S. Michael Szczerbaty, M.A., MHSC, LACDMH ASOC

Part 1

What is mindfulness? “Mindfulness is a way of learning to relate directly to whatever is happening in your life so that you can experience greater vitality and well-being in the present moment.”¹ Rather than thinking about what may lie ahead of events from the past, mindfulness is an educational program that offers a way of living more skillfully and recovery-oriented which can help you expand your awareness, discover choices where none were seen before, and live your life in a more deeply satisfying way by providing the insight necessary to accomplish these tasks. It is a way of doing something for yourself that no one else can do for you. It teaches an approach for systematically transforming stress, whether from pain, illness, or the challenges and demands of everyday life. Mindfulness is now considered by many to be evidence-based and one of the quickest routes to recovery from emotional distress and reduction in symptoms from mental illness.

“Mindfulness is about seeing clearly without one’s conditioned patterns of perceiving clouding awareness, and without trying to frame things in a particular way. It is important to learn to see in this way because how a person perceives and frames the moment generates one’s reality.”²

I recently came across an interesting *Huffington Post* blog that was titled *How Mindfulness is Revolutionizing Mental Health Care*. It begins by giving some verifiable mental health statistics. For example: “Overall, the World Health Organization estimates that roughly 450 million people suffer from some form of mental or neurological disorder – and that roughly one in four people will be affected at some point in their lives. These numbers are staggering. With the rise of mental illness and the increasingly pressing need for effective treatments, there’s never been a more important moment for mindfulness – the ability to cultivate a focused, non-judgmental awareness on the present moment. Research has shown mindfulness and meditation-based programs to hold promise for treating a number of psychiatric conditions, including depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, bipolar disorder and obsessive-compulsive disorder.”

Huffington Post writer Carolyn Gregoire goes on to say, “Anyone can stand to benefit from learning to cultivate a focused, non-judgmental awareness on the present moment.” She even mentions Jon Kabat Zinn, a research pioneer of mindfulness and founder of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction, who stated, “research and testimonials

¹ Dianne Handlin, Ph.D.: Psychotherapy for People in Transition. <http://www.drhandlin.com/mindfull.htm>

² Shapiro, S. L. & Carlson L. E. (2009). *The Art and Science of Mindfulness – Integrating Mindfulness into Psychology and the Helping Professions*

from patients and clinicians suggest that we can turn the medication down and the meditation up.”³

An individual’s control of their breath plays a significant part in mindfulness concentration. Since breathing is a naturally occurring event, it is easier to concentrate on your breathing as opposed to more advanced techniques, such as visualizing something you conjure up with your mind as a painting or something you create yourself. So, the first goal, when one begins meditation, is to meditate on the counting of each breath.

First, you need to find a comfortable place to sit, and assume a posture that is relaxed yet upright and alert. Place your left hand, palm side up, in your right palm. Focus your attention on your breathing as the main object of attention, feeling the breathing in, the rise and fall of the abdomen (not the chest), the breathing out, the rise and fall of the abdomen, feeling the air as it leaves the nostrils. While your head is held upright and forward looking, your eyelids are half closed and your eyes are looking down at the floor. Your feet should be planted firmly on the ground. Keep your eyes focused a yard or two in front of you. If you can, try to maintain a comfortable partial smile.

After taking a couple of deep breaths, begin to follow your breathing pattern and relax all of your muscles. Concentrate on keeping your back straight and follow your breath. Slowly breathe in through your nose and slowly exhale through your mouth. As for everything else, let it go. Let go of everything. Let all the muscles in your hands, fingers, arms, and legs relax. Hold on to nothing but your breath and the half smile. Count each inhalation and exhalation as one, two, three, four, and so on, until you reach ten. When you reach ten, begin again at one. This repetition continues throughout the meditation exercise.

At first, you will be lucky to reach three without thinking of something else other than counting your breath. Some fleeting thought will tempt you to grasp it. When this happens – and it will – try not to think of something other than your breathing, or your inability to stay focused on counting each breath. Whenever this occurs, simply begin again at one, and go as high as you can until you reach ten. This will take some practice. You will find that reaching ten is not as easy as it sounds. When you go astray in your counting, just begin again at one. The important thing to remember is to stay focused on the moment, **ON YOUR BREATHING**.

Keep in mind that your thoughts, like each breath, come and go. The next breath does not yet exist. “There is only the present breath you are taking. If you worry about your next breath or dwell too long on the past breath, you have lost the moment with the present breath you are taking.”⁴

³ The blog I am referring to in this article can be accessed by clicking on the link below:
http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/01/23/neuroscience- mindfulness_n_6531544.html

⁴ www.mindfulness.com

“The past is gone; you can do nothing about it. The future is not yet here, so there is no need to worry about it. The only gift of life you have is now, the present moment.”⁵

This is called being mindful. When you become aware of and practice being mindful throughout each day, it is virtually impossible to have any feeling of what we commonly refer to as stress. The first benefit you will realize, if you practice mindfulness breathing, is the reduction of stress in your life. Again, it is impossible to experience stress when being mindful.

⁵ Jon Kabat-Zinn, (1994). *Where You Go, There You Are: Mindfulness Meditation in Everyday Life* (Hyperion)

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Part 2

As your practice of meditation progresses over time, being mindful of the here and now throughout the course of the day becomes easier. In the meantime, avoid chastising yourself when your thoughts wander. Remind yourself that as your practice deepens, wandering thoughts lessen. An important goal is to “remember to remember” to be mindful, especially when a stressful situation arises demanding your immediate attention. In the beginning, it is easy to allow stress into our thinking and hard to be ever vigilant in being mindful. The more you try to be mindful of moment-to-moment experience, the easier it gets.

“Mindfulness is a state of active, open attention on the present. When you are mindful, you observe your thoughts and feelings from a distance, without judging them as good or bad. Mindfulness means living in the moment and awakening to moment-to-moment experience.”⁶

“With this ability, one sees things without condemnation or judgment. The discriminating mind is seen to be what it really is. One is surprised by nothing. There are no biases. One simply takes a balanced interest in things exactly as they are in their natural states. One does not decide and does not judge. One simply observes. Mindfulness treats all experiences equally, all thoughts equally, all feelings equally. Nothing is suppressed. Nothing is repressed. Mindfulness does not play favorites. Mindfulness is spiritual. Mindfulness is present-time awareness.”⁷

This mindset takes place in the here and now. It is the observance of what is happening right now, in the present moment. If you are remembering the good times you had last week with a friend that is memory. When you then become aware that you remember that experience, it is mindfulness. If you conceptualize the process and tell yourself, “I remember,” that is thinking. (The difference is very subtle.)

Keep in mind that to be successful you must make doing meditation a habit. Unless you do this, it will be difficult to get the benefits that meditation offers. The goal is to do your meditation every day at the same time, and preferably, in the same place. In my own experience, when I began Zen meditation, I found that it takes approximately two to three months before meditation becomes a lasting habit. This time period and lasting habit can also be found in jogging.

What has been described above as mindful breathing, at first glance, might seem easy. In actual hands-on practice, you will not find this easy. This is about re-training the mind. Our minds are often used to jumping from one thought to another, unimpeded.

⁶ Psychology Today. What is Mindfulness?

⁷ Jon Kabat-Zinn, *ibid.*

While this seems difficult at first, now you can utilize mindfulness meditation to take control.

The amount of time it takes to meditate is up to each individual practitioner, but I have found 30-minute sittings are the norm, especially at Zen centers or most any other type of meditation center. Good luck!

“Intelligence is the door to freedom and alert attention is the mother of intelligence.”⁸

⁸ Kabat – Zinn, J. (2005). *Wherever You Go, There You Are; Mindfulness Meditation in Everyday Life* (10th ed.).