

Mindfulness Meditation for Distress by Christine Molnar, Ph.D.

It is easy to miss out on your life when almost all of your energy and attention are invested in avoiding pain. People diagnosed with certain emotional disorders do this. They get so invested in mental and behavioral habits aimed at avoiding unpleasant experiences that they miss out on the moments that make up their very lives.

This intention to avoid pain is very human and our bodies are even wired to learn to do it automatically. It only takes one burn from a hot flame to teach us to avoid it and the things and places associated with it.

Many respond similarly to emotional pain. Add to our human inclination to avoid unpleasant feelings a conscious mind that remembers, thinks, and imagines potential sources of pain and you have a person whose life can become stuck in unnecessary suffering.

Emotional and physical pain is inevitable, but when we add efforts to get rid of and avoid this pain we prolong our suffering. Fortunately, through mindfulness meditation we can train our attention to be aware of and release the mental and behavioral habits that are magnifying suffering and limiting our life.

Mindfulness can guide us in reclaiming the many moments that make up our life and in skillfully responding to intense negative emotions.

Mindfulness is the awareness that occurs when we intentionally focus our attention on the present moment with a certain set of attitudes.

It can be learned in a class called mindfulness based stress reduction training (MBSR) that was originally developed for people with physical pain that did not respond to traditional Western treatments.

Through MBSR one relearns how to perceive inner and outer events non-conceptually and through direct sensory experience in this moment. Such perception is less blinded by previous experiences (e.g., our conditioning) and the stories we tell ourselves about reality.

Mindfulness is really a way of life that enhances our ability to let go of mental habits that are not useful and redirect energy in a way that will assist us in getting our needs met creatively and flexibly.

Mindfulness is best understood through the direct experience of practice that is guided by an instructor in person or via a meditation CD. Guidance is especially important if someone is depressed or anxious while meditating. A trained instructor will guide you in paying attention to experience with certain attitudes that include relating with self and others compassionately with patience, equanimity, acceptance, curiosity, and openness and without striving or reactivity. Mindful attention resembles the attention of an effective parent toward his or her child. Just like good parenting, mindfulness also requires consistency and discipline.

MBSR training starts with instructions for attending to just one object, such as the breath or simple sound sensations, and letting go of the automatic judgments that may occur when the mind meets certain experiences or wanders. Eventually one learns to attend mindfully to multiple objects in the field of awareness, such as thoughts, internal and external sensations, and feelings without mental and behavioral reactivity. Ultimately the goal is to bring this way of paying attention into everyday life so that our responses are based on what is real and effective.

For more information about mindfulness meditation visit www.meta4stress.com.

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Mindful Exposure Therapy for Anxiety (META) & Psychological Wellness Center, Inc.

The easiest way for many to begin is by dropping into the direct experience of sensations of the breath, right now, moment to moment and the calm stillness that lies at the end of the out breath. This stillness remains always constant even as the breath and other experiences arise and pass out of the field of awareness.

We are not clearing the mind, we are not relaxing, and we are not engaging thoughts about anything. If images of breath or thoughts or striving to relax emerge we let them be in the background and return to the feel of the breath here now. The out breath supports us in releasing everything but feelings of breath. With each in breath we can be receptive to what is here now. In this way we can anchor attention in this moment without reactivity. We do not tune anything out or get rid of any experience. We feature breath sensations center stage and let everything else be just as it is without doing anything about it.

MBSR is effective at reducing distress because it anchors us in this moment and teaches us to pause before responding and see the big picture consequences of our choices. Anxiety and depression are marked by a narrow focus on the past or the future and both are associated with a short-sighted reactivity that aims to avoid unpleasant feelings. Not surprisingly, elements of MBSR have been integrated into traditional psychotherapy for a range of emotional disorders that are associated with unhealthy behaviors.

Many psychologists now teach mindfulness to people who tend to get hijacked by their emotions. The thoughts, body sensations, and urges to engage in behaviors that we learn to notice mindfully through meditation are all components of emotions. Consider fear with its thoughts about future threat, its sensations of the body mobilizing to protect itself, and its urges to escape and vigilantly search for threat. When based on accurate perception of reality, primary emotions such as fear promote survival and tell us what we need.

Mindfulness teaches people to pause and be aware of what is actually here and possible right now, before responding when fear is present. Fear may be in response to something imagined and not here now. Once grounded in a still and spacious awareness that is always a breath away, one can observe the elements of emotions such as fear and respond skillfully based on what is here now. Mindfulness strengthens awareness of the big picture consequences that follow the mental and behavioral choices we make moment to moment.

Some emotions are just wasted energy. Anxiety and depression, called secondary emotions, waste our energy and muddy our perception by crowding out what else can be perceived through attention and awareness. A body responding to anxious thoughts about the future and depressive thoughts about the past as if they are present now is not responding to what is here right now in this moment. Mindfulness can teach us to ground emotional experience in what is really here now and to let go of the mental and behavioral habits that take a toll on our body unnecessarily. With mindfulness we can respond skillfully when anxiety and depression arise, notice the adaptive primary emotions we may be habitually avoiding, and choose a response grounded in reality.

With practice one can train attention to notice a spacious awareness that is much larger than the thoughts, sensations, and behavioral urges of maladaptive emotions. This allows us to let go of the mental and behavioral habits that take a toll on our body unnecessarily. With mindfulness we can respond skillfully when anxiety and depression arise, notice the adaptive primary emotions we may be habitually avoiding, and choose a response grounded in reality.

With practice one can train attention to notice a spacious awareness that is much larger than the thoughts, sensations, and urges of maladaptive emotions. This allows us to pause and see creative ways of responding to what is actually here and possible right now. Awareness is always only one mindful breath away. Paying attention mindfully can actually be a life saver because it grounds attention in this moment which is the only time we ever have for learning, growing, and being alive.

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