What is Mindfulness Meditation?
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Mindfulness Meditation is a western, non-sectarian, research-based form of meditation derived from a 2,500 year old Buddhist practice called Vipassana or Insight Meditation. It is a form of meditation designed to develop the skill of paying attention to our inner and outer experiences with acceptance, patience, and compassion. The University of California Center for Mindfulness, part of the medical school’s psychiatry department, defines Mindfulness Meditation this way:

“(Mindfulness) is a quality, which human beings already have, but they have usually not been advised that they have it, that it is valuable, or that it can be cultivated. Mindfulness is the awareness that is not thinking but which is aware of thinking, as well as aware of each of the other ways we experience the sensory world, i.e., seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling, feeling through the body.

“Mindfulness is non-judgmental, open-hearted, friendly, and inviting of whatever arises in awareness. It is cultivated by paying attention on purpose, deeply, and without judgment to whatever arises in the present moment, either inside or outside of us. By intentionally practicing mindfulness, deliberately paying more careful moment-to-moment attention, individuals can live more fully and less on ‘automatic pilot,’ thus, being more present for their own lives.”

Why Practice Daily?
Consistent daily practice promotes the development of stability, inner calmness, and non-reactivity of the mind. In turn, this allows us to face and embrace even the unpleasant or painful aspects of daily life. The stability and non-reactivity we cultivate in formal practice supports our ability to become more compassionate human beings, experiencing the joys of pure non-reactive presence. By developing a simple and pure awareness, we learn to disentangle ourselves from our habitual thoughts, emotions, and behaviors and connect with our experience, with ourselves, and with others in a healthier and deeper way.

As human beings, it seems it is natural for our minds to wander frequently. We are often lost in daydreams about the past or the future, or even thoughts about the present moment. Most of these mental distractions aren’t very useful and quite often produce stress, anxiety, fear, worry, and all sorts of emotional suffering. Regular daily practice of Mindfulness Meditation develops our ability to pay attention to our immediate experience – The Now – helping us to overcome such pre-occupations so that we can clearly see what is happening in our actual lived experience of the present moment. Instead of finding ourselves at the mercy of worry, fear, anger, and the like, we grow in our ability to choose how we want to act in situations, often in ways that might have been out of our reach before.

How Should I Practice Mindfulness?
Mindfulness Meditation is a practice of being fully and attentively present in the moment. In the same way one might practice a musical instrument or martial arts form, we practice being mindful and aware through skillful meditation. In formal practice we use the breath as an object of awareness. We follow the physical sensations of the breath as it flows in and out of the body. We allow the breath to flow naturally without controlling it as you would in a breathing exercise. We simply hold the sensation of breath in our field of awareness.

One of the first things we learn when we try to do this practice is how easily distracted the mind can be. All sorts of thoughts, ideas, feelings, and sensations call for our attention and we find we’ve forgotten all about the breath. When we realize we’ve been distracted, the appropriate response is to simply return to awareness of the breath with kindness, gentleness, patience, and a little dose of curiosity about ourselves.

As with any new skill, this becomes a little easier each time and develops best if we set aside any self-conscious judgments or expectations about how our meditation is developing. The practice is to simply relax and wake up to the awareness of what is happening in the present.

Has there been any Research on the Effects of Mindfulness Meditation?
Since 1967, over 1500 studies have been conducted by over 250 independent research institutes showing Mindfulness Meditation to be clinically effective for the management of stress, anxiety and panic, chronic pain, depression, obsessive thinking, strong emotional reactivity, and a wide array of medical and mental health related conditions.
In fact, the UMass Medical School’s Center for Mindfulness Stress Reduction Program’s medical outcomes from 15,000 patients’ participation since 1979 have shown “a 35% reduction in the number of medical symptoms and a 40% reduction in psychological symptoms."

Mindfulness Meditation programs are being conducted in hundreds of hospitals, healthcare facilities, schools, corporate wellness programs, and prison settings all across the United States, and around the world. In addition to significant reductions in stress, proven benefits of Mindfulness Meditation include but are not limited to:

- Elevated immune system function
- Less frequency and duration of illnesses
- Improved management of pain
- Decreased heart rate and blood pressure
- Improved sleep and digestion
- Increased energy
- Improved mental function, intelligence, and memory
- Improved decision-making ability
- Less irritability, anxiety, and depression
- Improved interpersonal relationships
- Increased resilience to change
- Aid to smoking cessation efforts

**Mindfulness for Stress Reduction**

The mind and the body are intimately connected, our physical health being greatly determined by our mental and emotional disposition. Kenneth Pelletier, PhD., of Stanford Medical School succinctly stated, “Mind and body are inextricably linked, and their second-by-second interaction exerts a profound influence upon health and illness, life and death.”

According to the American Psychological Association, the six leading causes of death in the U.S. are all linked to stress – heart disease, cancer, lung ailments, accidents, cirrhosis of the liver, and suicide, and research has implicated chronic stress as a major contributor to a wide variety of diseases and other health issues such as:

- Headaches
- Suppressed immune system
- Rheumatoid arthritis
- Diabetes
- Sleep disorders

A landmark, 20-year study conducted by the University of London concluded that "unmanaged reactions to stress were a more dangerous risk factor for cancer and heart disease than either cigarette smoking or high cholesterol foods."

Chronic stress also exerts a strong and adverse affect on the brain even altering brain cells, brain structure, and brain function. Research has shown that unmanaged stress:

- Diminishes short, and long-term memory
- Inhibits the formation of new memories
- Diminishes the ability to learn new things
- Diminishes problem-solving abilities
- Diminishes the ability to concentrate

Through the regular daily practice of Mindfulness Meditation we can completely change our relationship to stressors while at the same time greatly reducing the adverse affects of chronic stress. Every time we sit to meditate we are actively supporting and promoting our own health and well-being in heart, mind, and body.

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