

BY DIANE HANDLIN, PH.D.

THE PERFECT PRESENT

How practicing mindfulness can reduce stress and improve your sense of well-being.

Spirit

Most of us have experienced moments of mindlessness - a loss of awareness that results in forgetfulness, separation from self, and feeling like a machine. Our fragmented, technology-driven culture can force us to live in a way that diminishes our capacity for finding deep fulfillment. In addition, our ingrained, habitual patterns of thinking and ways of relating to society tend to distort how we interpret events, view others, and experience ourselves. The practice of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) helps people differentiate between the experience of pain (which is inevitable) and the experience of suffering (the stories we tell ourselves about what our pain means). Distinguishing between the two can be liberating. Mindfulness—the practice of paying attention moment by moment without



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judgment and with affection—is a method of learning how to relate directly to whatever is happening in your life so that you can experience greater vitality in the present. MBSR was developed by Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn, founder of the Stress Reduction Clinic of the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care,

and Society at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, to help people cope with pain, stress, anxiety, and illness. MBSR training teaches students techniques such as sitting or reclining meditation, and mindful yoga, as well as guidance in informal practices, such as mindful eating →

TO EXPLORE SOME OF THE INFORMAL PRACTICES OF MBSR, FOLLOW THESE STEPS

1. In the morning, take a few moments to experience your breath, the miracle of being alive and the

reality that you can intentionally approach your day.

2. Tuning into your breathing, try to inhabit your body as you prepare for the day. Before turning on the radio, take time to be with yourself as you relate to the physical reality of your life in that moment.

3. Connect with your

body. Where is there tension? How are you carrying yourself at that moment?

Care for your body by being present to it, letting go of tensions as best you can. Visualize carrying yourself with true dignity.

4. Make an appointment to meet yourself once an hour to experience your breath-

ing and to take a snapshot of your physical self at that moment.

5. Use physical reminders in your environment to focus on your body, acknowledging tensions and striving to let go of them. Notice your feet touching the floor when you get out of bed or the water flowing over you in the

shower.

6. Pause to really see the significant person or pet that you are leaving in the morning and coming home to at the day's end.

7. Most important: Pause to be with yourself. Remember that the power of true renewal lies in attending to the smallest details of being alive in each moment.

Spirit

and walking, that can help them expand their awareness of the present moment.

"MBSR opened my mind to a different way of looking at things and fostered exploration," says Jane Dobson, a Bergen County corporate attorney. "When I am mindfully present, time seems to expand. I relax, freed from thinking about the next place I have to be or the next thing I have to do. I have discovered that if I hold off, I usually do not act along the lines of my first reaction. I've also rediscovered my 'happy me,' what I remember from so long ago, and that is really wonderful."

Numerous studies have validated MBSR's role in promoting practitioners' management of their own health. The National Institute of Health is currently funding more

than 50 studies on the effects of mindfulness on health and healing. In one study 85 percent of people who completed MBSR training reported lasting decreases in physical and psychological symptoms. Other findings included significant decreases in anxiety, depression, and hostility; significant reductions in pain and an increased ability to cope with pain; increased long-term and short-term stress management; greater ability to relax; enhanced self-esteem; increased energy and enthusiasm for life; and a greater sense of peace and self-acceptance. **NJL**

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RECOMMENDED READING

Everyday Blessings: The Inner Work of Mindful Parenting by Myla Kabat-Zinn and Jon Kabat-Zinn

Full Catastrophe Living: Using the Wisdom of Your Body and Mind to Face Stress, Pain, and Illness by Jon Kabat-Zinn

Heal Thy Self: Lessons on Mindfulness in Medicine by Saki Santorelli

The Mindful Way Through Depression: Freeing Yourself From Chronic Unhappiness by Mark Williams, John Teasdale, Zindel Segal, Jon Kabat-Zinn

Wherever You Go, There You Are: Mindful Meditation in Everyday Life by Jon Kabat-Zinn

currently working on a book on mindfulness and offers courses in MBSR in Metuchen and Summit. For more information, call 732.549.9100 or visit mindfulnessnj.com or umassmed.edu/cfrn/mbsr.