

Tapping the Power of Mindfulness



We often hear phrases like “stop and smell the roses.” But simply enjoying the moment isn’t all that easy as we bounce between commitments to family, work and friends. Even as you read this, yesterday’s argument or next week’s deadline may be running through your mind, hampering your ability to be fully engaged in the moment and even to keep your focus on the words in front of you.

Come back, then. Be here now. Committing yourself to being totally present in the moment—no matter where you are or what you’re doing—is the heart of mindfulness. Experts say the practice involves purposefully paying attention to our thoughts and emotions without judging or evaluating them.

Considered a form of meditation with roots in Buddhism, mindfulness has become a mainstream technique for managing stress, losing weight, controlling pain and

encouraging creativity, even as we cope with life’s nonstop demands and distractions.

“Mindfulness helps you get rid of the to-do list and clutter in your mind,” says New Jersey-based psychotherapist and author Diane Lang, who speaks to audiences about positive living. “When you live mindfully, you live a less stressful life because you’re calm. We’re not trained [to live] like this—we multi-task, we’re always on the go—but it’s

“Mindfulness helps you get rid of the to-do list and clutter in your mind.” —DIANE LANG

really important to get outside of society’s norms. It will actually calm you down.”

Recent scientific research backs these claims. A Brown University study published in February 2013 indicates that mindfulness works as a sort of “volume knob” for sensations,

enabling people to control the brain rhythms that regulate pain and emotions.

Mindfulness also may change the actual structure of the brain. A 2011 study published in *Psychiatry Research: Neuroimaging* found mindful meditation increased gray matter in the hippocampus and other regions of the brain involved in emotional perspective and regulation. Researchers say having denser gray matter in these parts of the brain may help prevent or reduce conditions like depression, anxiety and sleep disorders.

To find out how real people incorporate mindfulness into their everyday lives—and how they benefit—we spoke with several and asked them to share their secrets.

- NEAL BOTTOM -
'No matter what stresses me,
I can take care of it'

During his parents' chaotic divorce when he was a child, Neal Bottom of Danville, Calif., discovered that listening to classical music before bedtime allowed him to stay in the moment and get rid of insomnia-inducing thoughts. In college, Bottom learned guided meditation. He began regularly practicing mindfulness when he later became an insurance claims adjuster, a stressful job that required dealing with the woes and demands of customers.

"A lot of times I would step outside and walk a couple laps around the block, trying to become more present," Bottom recalls. "Rather than fueling the anger in my own body and head, I tried to calm myself first ... it really changed my perspective."

Now age 35 and the co-founder of an organizational performance consultancy, Bottom continues to use deep breathing as a "road to mindfulness" when stressful situations arise. The technique allows him to focus on his chest movement and relax his muscles from head to toe.

"As I begin deep breathing, I can really feel that pressure subside, as well as my stomach [loses] that queasy, anxious feeling," Bottom says.

Mindfulness techniques, along with spending time outdoors, spark his creativity and help him solve problems, Bottoms explains. Both practices also helped him cope during his divorce.



tips

WAYS TO BE MINDFUL

Learning to master mindfulness is like any other skill—it takes practice and persistence. Psychotherapist and positive living speaker Diane Lang offers these tips to get started.

Take Time to Do Nothing. Don't use your break as thought time or nap time. Instead, just sit and observe. Try to clear your mind completely and enjoy the silence.

Do Only One Thing. Really focus on the task at hand and get totally absorbed in what you're doing.

Be an Active Listener. When someone is talking to you, stay present and don't think about anything else. Give direct eye contact.

Accept Yourself. Be aware of your emotions; don't push them down, avoid them or intellectualize them.

To find a reputable mindfulness instruction program, consult the University of Massachusetts Center for Mindfulness website www.umassmed.edu/cfm. It offers an online search tool to find mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) programs. All practitioners in this directory have participated in training programs approved by the Center for Mindfulness.

"I may start out my walk or meditation not really being able to hear anything going on around me, but all of a sudden I hear the birds, I feel the sunshine on my face. Once again, I realize I've got this. No matter what stresses me out, I'm going to be able to take care of it," Bottom adds.

- DIANA PEREZ -
'I've dropped about 70 pounds'

Genetics and stress both contributed to the heart attack Diana Perez of Budd Lake, N.J., suffered at age 45. But the single mother of two knew that

weighing 300 pounds also played a major role in her health crisis.

“Prior to my heart attack, I was an emotional eater,” says Perez, now 48. “Food became my crutch. Retrospectively, I see how much I didn’t care what I ate or notice how I was feeling when I was eating.”

Perez discovered mindfulness just after her heart attack. Using mindfulness helped her notice the taste and texture of what she was eating. She began differentiating between true physical hunger and eating to fill an emotional void.

“I’m able not to gorge or say, ‘There’s food here—let me eat it,’” she says.

“I’ve dropped about 70 pounds. I’m not

in tip-top shape yet, but I’m more consciously aware of what I’m eating, making sure it’s more for nourishment and not because I’m feeling bored or for other reasons.”

Along with mindfulness, Perez also learned—and now teaches—laughter yoga, a mind-body exercise involving voluntary laughter. Group laughter sessions are amazingly potent at keeping people in the moment, says Perez.

“When you’re laughing,” she explains, “you’re not thinking about the past or the future. You really are in the present.”

– RICHARD S. ELLIS –

[‘The suffering has disappeared’](#)

When chronic, blinding headaches began plaguing Richard S. Ellis in 2000, he responded with “anger, denial and extensive medication.” Even medication did not totally relieve the relentless pain, which began to suck all the pleasure from his life and work as a professor of mathematics and Judaic studies at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst.

Then in 2003, Ellis took a class in mindfulness-based stress reduction that radically changed how he dealt with his chronic pain.

“My mindfulness meditation is rather straightforward. It focuses on the breath. When a distraction comes, I observe it

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When you’re laughing, you’re not thinking about the past or the future. You really are in the present.”

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and let it go,” he says. “The main thing it does is to allow me to observe the pain rather than react to it.”

Lest this technique sound easy, Ellis admits, “it took years before I was able to come to terms with this.”

During this time, he continued to try different drug therapies to eradicate his headaches, but his doctors never found a cure or cause for his pain.

Ellis’ experiences motivated him to write the memoir, *Blinding Pain, Simple Truth: Changing Your Life Through Buddhist Meditation* (Rainbow Books Inc., 2011).

He is quick to point out that mindfulness didn’t cure his pain, though it has significantly diminished it both physically and emotionally.

“Although the pain continues, the intensity is greatly reduced and the suffering has disappeared,” Ellis says. “My pain is now totally manageable.” ■



SURPRISING SETTINGS FOR MINDFULNESS

Mindfulness has been embraced by the corporate world for its health benefits, as well as a way to encourage creativity and original thinking. Mindfulness techniques are even being taught in some unexpected settings.

- The U.S. Marine Corps has been testing brain-calming exercises that are based on mindfulness and other forms of meditation. It hopes these techniques will improve troops’ ability to handle high-stress situations and to recover more quickly afterward. Experiment results will be released later this year.
- Massachusetts correctional facilities offered mindfulness-based stress reduction courses to 1,350 drug-unit inmates in a 2007 study. Many showed significant improvements in self-reported measures of hostility, self-esteem and mood disturbance.