

Mindfulness for Pain

Most people who suffer from chronic pain are searching for answers. They want the pain to go, full stop. The fixation is with removal of suffering: Freedom from pain and suffering. In Buddhist theory dukkha (suffering) is accepted as a part of life. In fact, one of the first precepts of Buddhism states that "... Life is suffering". Sounds a bit solemn? Well this depends upon your perception of reality. Buddhist theory attempts to cultivate a sense of Mindfulness which in turn is able to invoke a sense of acceptance. Acceptance of the way things are, how they are, in the present moment. This conceptualisation of reality is markedly different from the Western perspective. It is almost a polar opposite. The Western mindset is set for avoidance of suffering and attachment to anything determined to be good.

A common definition of Mindfulness is paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment and non-judgementally (Kabat-Zinn, 1990). So if you have pain Mindfulness asks you to look at it, get to know elements of it and experience pain in its truest sense without judging it. Mindfulness involves practicing techniques which keep your mind focussed and more still. Mindfulness teaches you to cope with life more holistically and learn to relax when things get too busy (Whitehead, 2013). Mindfulness also enables you to respond differently and perhaps more effectively to situations of pain or stress without having to resort to medication (Whitehead, 2013).

There is a lot of talk about Mindfulness in the media at present. The jury is out on the origins of Mindfulness however it is probably not that important to know. What is important is research has suggested that Mindfulness to be extremely effective for the long-term management of chronic pain and arthritis (as well as other health and mental health concerns: Rosenzweig, Greeson, Reibel, Green, Jasser & Beasley, 2010). A group of individuals suffering from chronic pain showed a significant reduction in pain symptomatology after practising an 8-week Mindfulness course (Pradhan, Baumgarten, Langenberg, Handwerker, Gilpin, Magyari, Hochberg & Berman, 2007). Another group of arthritis (fibromyalgia) sufferers also displayed a significant decrease in their pain symptoms after practising a similar 8-week Mindfulness course (Grossman, Tiefenthaler-Gilmer, Raysz & Kesper, 2007). Although research into practising Mindfulness and pain alleviation is new and only a handful of research papers have been published, it seems these results are promising. Mindfulness may therefore be helpful for individuals who experience chronic pain. However the manner in which Mindfulness provides assistance to individuals may be of a surprise to beginners!

Mindfulness as a formal practice involves a variety of techniques. Some of these include sitting meditation practises, breathing techniques, walking meditations, gentle hatha yoga postures and lying meditations (body scans). Mindfulness can also include informal methods in daily life such as eating food or mundane tasks such as washing dishes. As evidenced, there is a range of techniques one is able to practice so a choice can be helpful especially if an individual has physical constraints or limited movement. Explanation of a formal Mindfulness technique and an informal practice will follow. If you are interested in practicing Mindfulness individually or with a group contact Jordan at Mindfulgym (mindfulgym@gmail.com).

Formal Mindfulness Technique

Watching the breath (Allow between 15-45 minutes).

Adapted from Williams, Segal and Kabat-Zinn (2007).

Come to a comfortable seated position, you can be kneeling or sitting, no matter the position try to maintain it for some time and not cause any extra strain. If sitting is too difficult try a chair or lie on your back. Now I would like to invite you to close your eyes. When you close your eyes you may notice a different world has opened up to you. It is this new world which you have given yourself this time to practice we will now explore together, safely.

First of all I would like to encourage you to take a few long and deep breaths. Inhale and exhale. Long inhalation... long exhalation. Connecting with your breath. You are trying to establish a deep union with your breath. Let your breath be your anchor. If you ever notice that your concentration has drifted from your breath, gently and without judgement return to concentrating on your breath. Each time you are aware that your thoughts have trailed off kindly return to focussing on your breath. The point at which you do notice you have lost the connection with your breath you might like to congratulate yourself, as this is the point of true present moment awareness. It is at this point you are experiencing Mindfulness.

Your breath will keep you grounded. Your breath will help to still your mind. If at any time during this practice you notice uncomfortable feelings, whatever they may be refocussing on the breath will help you. If you ever feel you cannot cope, either here or on the outside connecting with the breath can be your powerful ally. Use your connection with your breath to your advantage.

After some time open your eyes slowly and reflect on your practice. You might notice new feelings or sensations in your body. You may even feel a new sense of calm or relief.

Informal Mindfulness Technique

Mindful eating (Allow 5-10 minutes)

Adapted from Whitehead (2013)

This practice is designed for you to take a look at what you eat and slow down a little. It encourages you to look at the food with all the senses involved in eating. You will learn to be more aware of each bite you take of your food. You will come inside yourself and be more present when you are eating. You might eat more slowly and carefully.

Take a piece of food (e.g., sultana, fruit) in your hand and hold it and focus on it, imagine you are from a different planet and have never seen a raisin before, what is it like? Gaze at it exploring every part, notice texture, lines and lighting. Touch it all over and explore its texture, close your eyes and see if this enhances the experience. Smell the food. Place it close to your nostrils noticing any aromas which may arise, also does this stimulate feelings in your stomach or mouth? Next place it between the lips, noticing how it gets to that area. Without chewing allow it to enter into your mouth. Now taste the piece of food. Explore the sensations of having it in your mouth, let your tongue feel it, take one or two gentle bites and notice what happens after, do you feel a wave of taste sensation, notice changes in the taste and texture of the food as it is inside your mouth. Lastly swallow the food, consciously swallow the food when you feel ready to noticing the unconscious urge to swallow and continue to eat. Finally follow the food down into your stomach. Imagine the food passing down the pharynx to the stomach and notice how your body is feeling as a whole after completing this exercise.

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