

Mindfulness And Breathwork



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Through the ages spiritual seekers and practitioners of all traditions have studied and practiced the art of meditation as a way to access the source of spiritual energy or inner peace; a skill to be harnessed on the path to enlightenment.

There are thousands of meditation techniques that range from chanting, creative visualization and transcendental meditation to name just a few. Mindfulness is a technique that is the foundation of the Buddhist method or Zen practices.

However, in recent years mindfulness has spread from of the monasteries, finding it's way into medicine, the corporate world, and the lives of many who are seeking a way to navigate a world of distraction and intensity.

Millions of people across the planet are seeing mindfulness as a tool of resilience and a way to fulfill their potential and support their health. Resources are now being poured into medical research around the effects of mindfulness.

Jon Kabat Zinn, a Canadian medical doctor, has been instrumental in creating a widely used program called “Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction:” applying it in medicine as a tool to manage pain and the effects of stress.

Leading business schools are now offering mindfulness as part of their curriculum, and many organizations are beginning to integrate it into their business culture. Leading the way are businesses like Google who have initiated an entire program for their employees called “Search Inside Yourself.”

The subject has even found it's way on the cover of Time Magazine recently, and has been featured in a recent issue of the Harvard Business Review.

What is Mindfulness?

Mindfulness has been described as the practice of having COMPLETE FOCUS on the PRESENT MOMENT with NO JUDGEMENT.

While this might sound simple, in a world of constant distraction, this can be quite challenging. However, it has been found that people who have a dedicated daily mindfulness practice experience far greater, focus, clarity and better health.

A recent study has demonstrated that just 12 minutes a day of a consistent practice for 8 weeks creates a permanent thickening of the grey matter in the frontal cortex of the brain, in the area responsible for logical thinking, focus and empathy.

About 85% of our thinking, perceptions, choices, impulses, addictions and other behavior patterns are governed by the subconscious mind or the reptilian brain, which contains all

the memories of our past experiences. This 'reactive mind' creates the filters through which we experience our world.

Most of us get through our daily lives by handing life over to our 'autopilot' mechanism of the subconscious mind; the home of self-sabotaging behavior. We battle constantly between our hardwired patterns and what we 'know' is more supportive of our wellbeing.

As result we suffer the long-term effects of stress and a disconnection from our body's wisdom.

Five Reasons to Practice Mindfulness

1. It is a powerful way to exercise the 'muscle of awareness' of the conscious mind. New neural pathways get fired up in the brain. We develop the skill of being less reactive and more responsive to life; and we tend to make better choices for our lives and health.

2. As a result of living a high demand life, we are running on 'adrenalized energy', which is damaging to our long term health. Mindfulness is a way to cultivate the ability to harness and manage our authentic energy, by being able to deactivate the chronic stress response that we are locked into.

3. Mindfulness is a pillar of health, activating the body's innate wisdom and enhancing the body's ability to heal itself.

4. It is a tool for creating greater focus, clarity and calmness. The result is greater effectiveness, resilience and the ability to grow from challenges rather than being depleted by them.

5. When we practice mindfulness we live more consciously, and are better equipped to fulfill our potential in all the aspects of our lives.

Two Simple Mindfulness Practices

1. Choose a short daily task that only lasts a few minutes, for example, brushing your teeth, washing the dishes, or taking a shower.

Practice becoming fully present in your experience by waking up all five senses.

2. Sit or lie in a comfortable position and bring yourself into the present moment by focusing on the breath. Without trying to 'empty the mind'. Welcome all the feelings, thoughts and sensations without judgment. Just simply observe them.

As soon as you become aware of the mind activity, just gently let your breath guide you back to the present. Do this for 10 minutes a day and work up to 15- 20 minutes.

Just as we are not aware of the constant running commentary that is directing our thoughts and behaviors, we are usually not aware of how our breathing is responding to the constant chatter.

Every thought, emotion and physical state that we experience has a corresponding breathing pattern.

Bringing our attention to how we are breathing in our everyday life allows us to slow down and become aware of our internal dialogue, reactions, physical posture, as well as our external environment.

It is way to activate intuitive wisdom, manage our energy, sharpen our listening skills, and create freedom from the reactive mind.

Not only is breathwork a tool of mindfulness, it is also the most powerful and simple way to deactivate the hardwired stress response.

The body has built in mechanisms to do this, however we have suppressed them in the attempt to “be polite.” Yawning and sighing are natural mechanisms that are employed to release tension and to access authentic energy.

Amazing research has been done on the neurobiological and immunological effects of yawning. Not only does yawning optimize the oxygenation and the flow of energy to the brain, it also activates our mirror neurons which would explain why yawning is contagious!

There are thousands of breathing techniques that can be practiced and applied in every day life. There are various techniques that can be used to achieve different effects; for example, creating calm before sleep or kick-starting our energy when it starts to wane.

Conscious breathing practices wake up “breath intelligence.” As a result, oxygenation to the cells improves, the immune system is strengthened, and the body's metabolism is optimized.

The breath then automatically changes in a way that is most appropriate to the situation. In other words the ability to master the breath supports the ability to master life.

Three Simple Breathwork Techniques

1. The Sigh of Relief

As soon as you notice that you are feeling irritable and the body is tensing up, take a deep long slow breath in and snap the exhale out with a soft and complete sigh. You can do this more than once. This is a quick and effective way to let go of a build up of tension.

This is useful when standing in a queue or sitting in traffic.

2. The Square Breath.

This technique is useful for regaining a sense of control when you feel overwhelmed. Breathing in and out through the nose, breathe in for a count of 4, hold the breath for a count of 4, exhale slowly for a count of 4, and hold again for a count of 4 before inhaling. Continue for five minutes.

3. The Energy Breath

Breathe in fully, and exhale naturally. At the end of the exhale, suck the belly button in towards the spine and hold the breath for a few seconds until you feel the urge to breathe in again.

To enhance the effects: let your spine curl as you exhale and empty your lungs, and let it straighten as you inhale and fill your lungs. Continue this for 5 minutes.

Thank you to Ela Manga, MD for submitting this article. You can learn more about her at www.drelamanga.com

Further Study

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