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# Mindfulness MYTH VS. FACTS

BY DR LILLIAN NEJAD

Mindfulness is the new “It” skill, hailed as the panacea for almost everything. However, just because mindfulness has hit the mainstream does not mean we have a strong understanding or solid foundation to build our practice.

It’s critical to separate fact from fiction, sifting through the noise and misinformation around mindfulness. Simplifying your practice first and understanding the process, not just the end goal is the key to reaping its benefits.

**MYTH:** *Mindfulness is a spiritual, esoteric practice that involves sitting quietly in the lotus position.*

**FACT:** Mindfulness is a form of meditation, but you don’t need to become a Buddhist monk to get the benefits.

Mindfulness is derived from Buddhist meditation practices; however, the way it is applied in psychology and medicine does not necessarily have a spiritual component—unless you want it to.

Mindfulness was first used in the realm of medicine in 1979 by Jon Kabat Zinn, from the University of Massachusetts’ Centre of Mindfulness to treat severe chronic pain.

Psychological therapies also began successfully incorporating mindfulness in the treatment of a variety of emotional, physical, and behavioural disorders. Now it is considered an evidence-based practice that improves and maintains psychological, physical and cognitive wellbeing.

Jon Kabat Zinn defines mindfulness as “the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, nonjudgmentally to the unfolding of experiences moment to moment”.

So what does this mean? Simply put, mindfulness is about noticing what is happening now without trying to judge it or change it in any way. It is applied to internal experiences like your thoughts and feelings, and your external events, for example, situations you are in or whatever you are observing with your senses.

**MYTH:** *Mindfulness is about clearing your mind.*

**FACT:** Mindfulness is about knowing your mind.

Every mind is different. The practise of mindfulness helps you

understand how your mind works, what your thought patterns are, which thoughts your mind likes to attach to and focus on, how fast it processes information, and where your mind likes to go when it wanders.

Why is this important? You can’t change something that you haven’t acknowledged and identified. Gaining insight into how your mind works and finding out what makes you tick is the pathway to making better decisions, and effectively and efficiently moving toward positive changes in your life.

**MYTH:** *The purpose of mindfulness is to make you feel better and more relaxed.*

**FACT:** Mindfulness is about being accepting of whatever you are feeling.

Sometimes the outcome of mindfulness is that you feel calmer and more relaxed; however, the purpose of mindfulness is to accept whatever is happening right now without trying to change it in any way, even if it is unpleasant.

This may seem counterintuitive—

aren’t we supposed to try to be confident and happy all the time?

Our culture of positivity and the business of happiness has caused us to view unpleasant or distressing feelings and thoughts as negative and to be avoided at all costs. However, the more we invalidate, suppress, ignore, and deny distress of any kind, the more powerful it becomes. The only way to effectively manage distress is to identify it, accept that it is valid, and work out the function of our emotions—mindfulness helps with all three.

**1 - Identify:** Mindfulness helps you notice and name your distress. Pushing your feelings down or ignoring, denying, or avoiding them makes them work harder to get your attention. Acknowledging distress is the first step to effectively managing it.

**2 - Validate & Accept:** Most people think of emotions as negative or positive, but every emotion has value. Mindfulness helps you view distress nonjudgmentally by helping you understand why you are distressed

and accept the fact that it is happening. Acceptance doesn’t mean you like it or think it’s fair, rather it’s about seeing reality as it is (not how you want it to be or how you think it should be).

Acceptance is the pathway to change. You can’t change something you haven’t accepted as part of your reality.

**3 - Understand the function:** Once you have identified and accepted your distress, mindfulness can help you work out what your mind if communicating to you. Pain, discomfort, guilt, fear—they are all part of the human experience for a reason. They have a function—they communicate something to you, and they motivate you to action. View your distress as helpful information that can help you plan the best way forward.

**MYTH:** *If your mind wanders, you are doing it wrong.*

**FACT:** If you notice that your mind has wandered, you are still doing mindfulness.

Expect your mind to wander, even during short two-minute



mindfulness sessions—it's just what our brains do. The practise of mindfulness is to notice this process without judgement. When your mind wanders, acknowledge and accept it nonjudgmentally and then bring it back to focus on your experience.

**MYTH:** *I don't have time to do mindfulness.*

**FACT:** You can incorporate mindfulness seamlessly into your life.

Mindfulness is a practical skill that can be done anywhere, with anyone, in any position, for as long as you want. You don't have to take a break to do mindfulness; we can be active and mindful at the same time!

Think about rock-climbers or race car drivers—they have to be entirely focussed on what they are doing to be effective and safe - that's mindfulness!

Think about an important meeting when you were entirely focussed on what your colleague was saying, or the time you were immersed with playing

on the swings with your kids. That's mindfulness too.

You can practice mindfulness in two ways: by opening the mind or focusing the mind. Opening the mind is about noticing whatever comes into your awareness, like observing your thoughts, emotions or physical sensations as they naturally occur. While focussing the mind involves attending to a specific internal or external experience, like your breath, a mantra, or focusing on one of your senses.

Below are beginner's tips for mindfulness:

Be practical by incorporating mindfulness into what you are doing already. For instance, we all brush our teeth every morning—now do it mindfully. Focus only on the experience of brushing your teeth; the smell and taste of the toothpaste, the texture of the bristles against your gums, the sound it makes, the motion of your arm and hand and so on. If you find your mind wandering, just notice this without

judging yourself and then bring your mind back to focusing on the experience again. You can do this with any activity you do regularly.

Focus on one of your senses: Touch a soft blanket, taste a grape, smell a flower, look at the clouds in the sky, listen to the sounds you hear around you. You choose how long you want to practice—even a couple of minutes can be beneficial.

Observe your thoughts and feelings during the moment. Notice your thoughts and feelings without trying to hold on to them or change them in any way. Observe how they change on their own over time without you having to do anything. If you find you are judging yourself, just notice that nonjudgmentally as well.

There is no question that mindfulness has a positive impact on physical, cognitive and psychological wellbeing. Research has shown this practice improves resilience, productivity, decision-making skills,

relationships, and can improve your immune system, lower blood pressure, manage pain, and reduce the risk of heart attacks and stroke.

Mindfulness is not a passing trend, but a helpful and practical skill that anyone can learn and experience the benefits across a lifetime. It appears overwhelming at first, and although mindfulness has the potential to bring both joy and pain, it's a skill that can help you improve and maintain your wellbeing for the rest of your life, and once you learn it, you never forget it.

Ultimately, mindfulness can change your relationship with the realities of life, so you can live it how it is, right now, effectively.



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