



LUKENOTES

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Mindfulness: Living With The Lights On

Hetty Irmer, LGSW

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Mindfulness is one of the concepts currently favored in popular culture to combat the "disease" that many of us feel in our lives at one time or another. While it may be tempting to dismiss the concept as yet another fleeting panacea for life's challenges, mindfulness deserves a second look. Grounded in over 2,000 years of Eastern philosophy and Western spirituality, the tradition of mindfulness has stood the test of time as a beneficial way to improve quality of life. In fact, mindfulness is a practical and useful tool that can be adopted by anyone to reduce suffering and enhance one's life.

Marsha Linehan, PhD., an innovator in the use of mindfulness in clinical psychotherapeutic interventions, uses this analogy to explain how mindfulness can be applied to every day life: life is like walking through a room full of furniture in the dark, trying to get from one side of the room to the other without bumping into things too badly. Living with mindfulness is getting through the room as skillfully and effectively as you can by turning on the lights. Conversely, a non-mindful life is trying to get across the room with the lights off.

There are two types of mindfulness: a formal meditation practice and an informal practice. **Formal mindfulness meditation practice** involves a specific method to maintain one's awareness on the present moment. The most common approach is sitting meditation where you sit in a straight, comfortable position with closed eyes, if you so choose. You breathe deeply, allowing your stomach to expand with each inhalation and making your exhalation slow and even. As you pay attention to your breathing, you gently notice what observations (emotions, cognitions or perceptions) pass through your awareness. When you find yourself getting carried away with an observation (which is inevitable), you gently return your awareness to your breath. Individuals begin this practice for five minutes and gradually increase the time until they are practicing formal mindfulness meditation for 20 minutes or more a day. **Informal mindfulness practice**, reminding yourself to be aware of the present moment, is something an individual can incorporate into their daily routine. For example, you can practice mindfulness while washing dishes, driving, exercising, gardening, and the like. As you go through your day, ask yourself, "Am I fully awake to this moment?" Use all five senses to notice the particular quality of this moment. Mindfulness, both formal and informal, is more than a method to increase awareness. It is a practice in the formal sense of the word: a habit, a custom, a way of being.

Benefits

What are the benefits of incorporating mindfulness practice into one's life? Recent clinical studies have demonstrated a broad range of physical and psychological benefits, including fewer symptoms of physical or psychological problems, regardless of the diagnosis. In addition, individuals may experience increased self-confidence, enhanced mental clarity and focus, greater sense of control in one's life, an increased willingness to look at stressful events as positive challenges, and a greater sense of meaning in life. Beyond these benefits, there are three primary ways in which sustained mindfulness practice can enhance the fundamental quality of one's life: an **increased awareness** of thoughts, emotions and behaviors, **acceptance** of the way things are, and **greater compassion** for oneself, others and the greater world.

Oftentimes, we go through our day without being fully aware of our thoughts, feelings or behaviors. Have you ever driven home, lost in thought, and when you pulled into your driveway you didn't know how you got there? You were driving without awareness. We are often unaware of the feelings that motivate a certain behavior, e.g., after a frustrating day at work, you snap at a loved one and do not know why. Regular practice of mindfulness meditation helps us be aware of a wide range of thoughts, feelings and behaviors, a form of "**awareness training**." Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn, mindfulness clinician and researcher, describes mindfulness as a way to develop the habit of "bringing one's complete attention to the present experience on a moment-to-moment basis."

Mindfulness meditation is like sitting on a hillside, watching a train go by. You notice each train car but you let them pass by without getting on. Initially, you might be surprised by the number of train cars (i.e., thoughts, feelings, perceptions) that pass through your awareness. Although it is inevitable that you will get on some cars, you can become more adept at letting the cars pass by. You practice not judging the thoughts that occur but simply accept them. Acceptance then begins to permeate your interactions with others as well as your relationship with yourself.

Prolonged mindfulness practice can lead to a transformation of self that is characterized by the expression of increased **compassion for oneself and others**. In ministry and in service to others, we are called to give love, attention and time for the good of God's creation. Mindfulness helps create the space to give love, attention and time to oneself, and subsequently to others, with greater awareness, acceptance and compassion and with renewed interest and energy as well.

Mindfulness meditation is similar to the prayer form of Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection. In *The Practice of the Presence of God*, he reminds us that by remaining habitually in the present and in the presence of God, we pray always. In the 12-step tradition of recovery, members pray: "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference." Mindfulness enables anyone to live this prayer daily by providing a personal and accessible

touchstone where one can find acceptance, gain courage and move forward in life with wisdom and compassion. Mindfulness helps us to live life "with the lights on," and to see God's ongoing gift of creation with open eyes.

Hetty Irmer, LGSW is a Continuing Care Psychotherapist at Saint Luke Institute.

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