



The magic of mindfulness

Simple, life-changing steps to get engaged and get healthy.

In our fast-paced, multitasking world, focusing on anything for more than a few moments at a time can be challenging. But learning to focus your attention on the present moment can have benefits that affect not only your attention span but also your health. That's why a practice called mindfulness has become a popular meditation technique for everything from stress reduction to chronic pain management. "It's the mind-body effect that's getting a lot of press and research, and for good reason. It works, and there's scientific support behind that," says Harvard Medical School professor Dr. Herbert Benson, a pioneer and world-renowned expert on the physiological changes that occur during meditation.



The concept

Mindfulness has its roots in Buddhism. It's about training your mind to focus on the present moment without judging thoughts and sensations. If that seems difficult, think about times when you've found yourself engrossed in an activity, such as dancing, listening to music, or painting—anything that allows you to become absorbed in it. If you can do that, you can practice mindfulness.

While many meditation practices evoke concentration by repeating a word or focusing on breathing, mindfulness also trains you to observe your thoughts, emotions, and internal and external sensations without judgment. This will keep you from drifting to the past or future, and help you focus instead on each moment as it happens.

The benefits

Practicing mindfulness can help you become more engaged in your daily activities and enable you to better appreciate life's pleasures as they happen. That can lead to improvements in concentration and happiness. But mindfulness also brings about a well-studied physiological change that can help lower your blood pressure, heart rate, breathing rate, oxygen consumption, adrenaline levels, and levels of the stress hormone cortisol. Dr. Benson calls it the relaxation response, which has the opposite effect of the body's stress response (which is associated with accelerated aging at the cellular level and an increase in inflammation throughout the body).

Dr. Benson's latest research shows that the relaxation response changes the expression of the genes that control your cells' energy. "You're actually turning on

the genes that affect the mitochondria, the organelles that generate energy in each cell of the body," he explains. Other research has shown that mindfulness and other approaches that elicit the relaxation response change brain activity and structure in ways that increase positive emotions and reduce negative emotions such as fear and anger.

As a result, mindfulness is now a common component of treatment for many conditions such as heart disease, depression, stress relief, high blood pressure, chronic pain, sleep problems, and anxiety disorders.

The practice

The steps of mindfulness and other techniques that bring forth the relaxation response are simple, but they may be challenging initially. So Dr. Benson urges you to give meditating a try and to be patient. You may wish to use a guided meditation recording or go to a class to learn how to practice mindfulness.

You can also try a simple technique on your own. To begin, sit quietly, close your eyes, and focus on your breathing. If you wish, say a word such as "peace" or "one" each time you exhale. Don't worry about thoughts that come to mind; decide to come back to them later, and repeat your word. This helps you bring your attention back to the present. You may only be able to sustain this for a few moments or minutes as you begin, but with practice you'll find yourself relaxing into the exercise for longer periods.

You'll have to practice this approach for at least 10 minutes a day in order to reap the physiological benefits. ♥

One response from many techniques

Mindfulness is just one form of meditation that evokes the relaxation response—the opposite of the body's stress response (see article above). The key is breaking the train of everyday thought. Here are some other approaches:

Transcendental meditation	uses a repeated sound or phrase to help you empty all thoughts from your mind
Guided imagery meditation	uses pleasing mental images, such as places or activities, to help you focus
Tai chi	a form of Chinese martial arts that includes deep breathing and slow movements and postures
Yoga	uses a series of postures, concentration, and controlled breathing
Qi gong	uses a combination of breathing exercises, physical movement, and meditation

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