The Benefits of Mindfulness Meditation

Over the past few decades, scientists have researched extensively on the cognitive and physical benefits of mindfulness meditation. Now used in multiple clinical interventions and cognitive therapy programs, mindfulness meditation may be able to reduce stress and depression, treat binge eating and other eating disorders, and contribute to greater cell longevity. Whether practiced daily or intermittently, mindfulness meditation can be an effective path toward enhanced well-being.

Introduction

Despite originating in Eastern contemplative traditions, meditation has today gained a foothold in both American popular culture and scientific research. In the U.S., many meditative practices have expanded beyond their reputation as stress-relieving exercises, and have been increasingly introduced by researchers as interventions for various psychological and behavioral disorders. Mindfulness meditation, in particular, has promised a myriad of health benefits for children and adults alike. Whether pursued as a clinical intervention or as a systematic method toward self-development and personal insight, mindfulness meditation may be able to address a wide range of health issues. Here, we take a look at some of these benefits.

What Is Mindfulness Meditation?

Mindfulness meditation is a form of meditation that prioritizes conscious living, summarized in the quality of mind-body awareness called mindfulness. The basis of mindfulness is surprisingly simple: avoiding unconscious or mechanical activity, tuning in to the present moment, and becoming fully aware of your inner sensations and the world around you.

Contrary to popular belief, mindfulness meditation does not consist of any special ideologies or belief systems. In fact, it does not need to be a time-consuming ritual that is performed at the same time every day. Rather, it harnesses the innate human capacity for self-awareness and attentiveness. Even
stopping what you are doing for a couple of minutes to bring attention to your bodily sensations, breathing, and thought patterns qualifies as a valuable act of mindfulness. [3]

Mindfulness meditation is far from being a passive practice, and it demands mental discipline, intention, and wakefulness on the part of the meditator. [3] Part of this discipline involves adopting a non-judgmental attitude toward thoughts and emotions, which means observing them objectively and without becoming absorbed in or unconsciously reactive to their content. It is also important to observe internal sensations without trying to change whatever is present, including potentially difficult thoughts and feelings. [4]

Applications of Mindfulness Meditation

As a form of integrative and complementary medicine, mindfulness meditation has the potential to support routine medical practices. [5] Various therapeutic programs, indeed, now contain elements of mindfulness training. Two of the most publicly recognized of these are Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) and Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT). [4]

MBSR, originally developed for the management of chronic pain and stress-related disorders, is the most frequently cited systematic training program for mindfulness meditation. [6] As an 8 to 10 week intervention, MBSR trains participants in stress and coping mechanisms as well as in meditation skills such as hatha yoga postures. [4]

MBCT, which involves a combination of MBSR and traditional cognitive therapy techniques, aims to prevent depression relapse. MBCT promotes a non-judgmental approach to emotions and bodily sensations, facilitating detachment through statements such as “I am not my thoughts.” [4]

What Mindfulness Meditation Can Do for Your Brain

Enhance your cognitive abilities

Mindfulness meditation may be able to improve brain function due to brain plasticity, or the brain’s ability to be changed over time. A 2003 study published in Psychosomatic Medicine evaluated the effects of an 8-week mindfulness meditation program on brain function. Results demonstrated for the first time that meditation can increase activity in the left anterior, or the front left, side of the brain. This region of the brain is associated with greater resilience toward negative or stressful events, suggesting that mindfulness training may be able to mitigate the cognitive effects of stress. [7]

Meanwhile, a 2005 study published in Neuroreport found that meditation practice also increases activity in the cerebral cortex, located in the front of the brain. Regular meditation practice may lead to increased thickness in the regions of the cortex that process visual and auditory information. [8] The cortex also plays an important role in maintaining present-moment awareness and regulating emotions, so meditation training may be able to enhance attention and self-control. [9]

Although evidence for a causal relationship between meditation and changes in brain structure remains tenuous, studies have consistently linked MBSR training to increases in the concentration of gray matter in the brain. A 2014 meta-analytic review published in the Neuroscience & Biobehavioral Reviews found that such neuroplastic changes can be induced even after just a few hours of meditation practice. [10]

Reduce symptoms of depression

As a combination of MBSR and cognitive therapy techniques, MBCT may be a powerful tool in reducing relapse for patients with recurrent depression. [6] Studies published in the Journal of Counseling and
Clinical Psychology in the years 2000 and 2004 discovered that MBCT reduced relapse rates for patients with 3 or more previous episodes of depression by almost 50%. [11-12] In addition to reducing depression relapse, mindfulness meditation techniques may counter depression by decreasing negative ruminative thought, which involves repetitive reflections on one’s assumed faults or shortcomings. [9]

What Mindfulness Meditation Can Do for Your Body

Boost activity in your immune system

In addition to improving cognitive function, mindfulness meditation may be able to enhance the vitality of the immune system, specifically by increasing antibody production. Antibodies are proteins produced by the immune system in order to destroy viruses and other harmful substances, and stressful events can decrease antibody production. A 2003 study published in Psychosomatic Medicine found that participants who completed an 8-week mindfulness meditation program experienced a greater increase in antibodies to influenza vaccine than a control group, suggesting that mindful meditators may be less vulnerable to the effects of stress on the immune system. [7]

Treat binge eating

Due to its emphasis on greater self-awareness and self-control, mindfulness meditation may be effective in treating eating disorders marked by binging. Evaluating a 6-week mindfulness intervention on obese women, a 1999 study published in the Journal of Health Psychology noted a significant drop in the number of binges reported by participants after mindfulness training. The study revealed that mindfulness meditation may increase the ability to recognize and respond to normal satiety cues, thereby decreasing the tendency to binge. [13]

Mindfulness-based interventions may also be able to improve emotional eating and reduce external eating frequency. By mitigating maladaptive eating behaviors, mindfulness practice can constitute an effective means toward weight loss and weight maintenance. [14]

Prevent cellular aging

Telomerase is an enzyme that hinders the age-related loss of genetic material, thus contributing to greater cell longevity. Its activity decreases with age and age-related diseases, but can may actually increase with meditation practice. A 2010 study published in Psychoneuroendocrinology investigated the effects of a 3-month meditation retreat on participants’ telomerase activity. According to the results, the retreat contributed to a significant increase in the activity of the enzyme, suggesting that meditation training can reduce the likelihood of cell death and age-related diseases. [9, 15]

When and Where to Practice Mindfulness Meditation

Mindfulness meditation can be pursued independently, as part of a course, or as part of a clinical intervention. There is no magical formula for cultivating mindfulness, and meditation techniques can be modified to individual needs and goals. Since mindfulness involves consciousness of internal and external stimuli, a quiet environment might be considered ideal. Nonetheless, mindfulness meditation does not need to be practiced in a secluded environment. MBSR and MBCT participants, for example, are trained in mindfulness meditation techniques as a group, and they are encouraged to practice mindfulness during ordinary activities such as walking, standing, and eating. Mini-meditations are also possible, allowing individuals to take a few moments to stop where they are and tune in to their thoughts and feelings. [4, 13]
The Future of Mindfulness Meditation

The pool of research on mindfulness meditation has been increasing rapidly throughout the past few decades. During the past decade alone, there was a tenfold increase in the number of academic articles published on the subject of mindfulness. The number of articles published on the topic reached a peak of 477 in 2012, revealing a significant and continued interest in mindfulness meditation within the scientific community. [16]

More methodological research may be needed to assess the extent to which mindfulness meditation can improve various aspects of biological functioning, but the research conducted so far has been very promising. [4] Mindfulness meditation is today considered to be effective in addressing a wide range of health issues, including stress, depression, and binge eating. In order to better address other psychological and behavioral disorders, scientists and health organizations are sure to further examine mindfulness meditation and its goal of conscious living.

References


To read the full publication in Total Wellness Magazine Issue 5 Volume 14, click here [http://issuu.com/totalwellnessmagazine/docs/back_to_nature_total_wellness_2].

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