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Mindfulness and Meditation Can Improve Health

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There is a path to health that involves no drugs, no doctors. It's a path taken by celebrities, CEO's, even your congressman. It's the practice of mindfulness and meditation. And science is now finding evidence that it works.

[Peter Carlson leads an introductory Buddhist meditation course at the Winter Park Woman's Club]

Peter Carlson teaches an introductory Buddhist meditation course at the Winter Park Woman's club. On a recent Monday evening, he tells his students that when something makes you uncomfortable, you need to think about it, explore it instead of simply backing away from the discomfort. He's never sure how many students will show up for a first class. Sometimes it's a handful, other times a couple dozen people will turn out. There is a growing interest in mindfulness and meditation that is spreading from the individual practitioner to the corporate world to the scientific world.



Image Source: 90.7 News | www.wmfe.org

"So what is mindfulness? That's a good place to start and mindfulness is real simple, it's knowing where your

mind is and what it's doing, " says Bob Allen, one of the founders of the media studio Ideas Orlando. He's also Buddhist and has been meditating since his teenage years. He says mindfulness, in its simplest form is awareness "Meditation is a practice, that's why we call it a practice. It's a behavior, if you will," he says.

When Allen began exploring mindfulness and meditation he was in a clear minority. Today major corporations are encouraging mindfulness among employees and books will tell you how mindfulness can give you a competitive edge. A lot of practitioners caution though, the hope of gaining a competitive edge is not the reason to take up mindfulness. Just the same, Allen says he deeply values the role mindfulness has played in his career.

"For me, it really has been, many times, the difference between night and day, my ability to not succumb to in a catastrophic way to some of the stresses to both corporate life and later entrepreneurial life, wouldn't have been able to do it without the practice," he says.

The key here is stress. Mindfulness and meditation not only teach people how to manage stress, it can actually lower it.

"Mindfulness meditation has to do with training the brain to be able to pay attention with a non-reactive or a non-emotionally elaborated state of mind, " says University of Miami Associate Professor of Psychology Amishi Jha. She is looking into how mindfulness meditation is benefiting people.

There are a lot of different ways to meditate. There's guided meditation, in which a teacher walks you through it. You can sit in a quiet room, burn incense and candles and focus on your breathing. You can lie down, you can walk, there are almost too many ways to list. Jha's research is looking specifically at mindful meditation.

"The parts of their brain that are changing really reflect, in some respects, this better, improved ability to pay attention," says Jha.

Remarkably, research is showing it can change the physical structure of the brain. She suggests thinking of

the brain like a wadded up piece of paper. As we age, that wad loosens, the spaces between the folds of the brain increase. But we don't want that.

"What we're finding is long-term practitioners actually have brains that actually look healthier, more squished together, more scrunched up in the parts of the brain that have to do with attentional control and regulating emotions and being aware of what we're experiencing," she says.

Research suggests that mindfulness and meditation can also help to improve relationships, even work relationships- and that has, in effect, set the business world abuzz. Google, for instance, offers free mindfulness courses to its employees, who report that mindfulness training has made them more emotionally resilient. Laura Schmid is a mindfulness practitioner who has been studying Google's path to mindfulness.

"So it's getting a lot of focus I think because corporations are finally getting to see the huge benefit that a mindfulness program can bring to their companies," she says. It occurred to her that employees here could benefit too. So she launched a company called Vibrant Mind.

"What I'm doing, I'm creating, I'm offering a service to bring mindfulness training to corporations in the Orlando area. So what we do, is we offer both workshops and guided sessions," she says.

As mindfulness moves into the business world, it's moving into the virtual world. Oh yes, there's an app for that. Even Congress gets it. During the government shutdown, a memo circulated saying that in spite of the shutdown, Congressional meditation sessions would continue.

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