WELLNESS

Minding Your Mind

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Minding Your Mind

Mindfulness is everywhere; the quality of being present in the moment without judgement or criticism in order to create a state of “bare awareness”. Since the godfather of the mindful revolution, Jon Kabat-Zinn helped shepherd esoteric Buddhist principles into the Western world in 1979, the growth of the mindfulness industry – now valued at over $4 billion – has been meteoric and pervaded every layer of society. It is now offered in schools, at universities, at hospitals and in the workplace; even the military is rolling it out and according to the *Harvard Business Review*, it can literally change your brain. New research on this hot topic is out and further reinforces the potential benefits to be had in what has been a revolutionary shift from the struggle to assuage collective suffering to that of the individual focused on self-transformation. These new studies reaffirm the value not only of mindfulness practices but of stress-reduction practices in general.

Military Mindfulness

New research from co-developers Dr. Amishi Jha and Scott Rogers of Mindfulness-Based Attention Training (MBAT) reveals cognitive decline due to the mental and emotional stress that active-duty soldiers are exposed to can be lessened with mindfulness instruction. MBAT instruction over four weeks via weekly two-hour sessions and daily
audio-guided sessions on topics of concentration, body awareness, open monitoring and connection was given to 180 active-duty army volunteers. The control group of soldiers received no mindfulness instruction. At the end of the study and a further four weeks later, the MBAT-instructed group, who also spent more time meditating on their own, showed the least decline in attention and memory.

Mindfulness in the Classroom

New research coming out of Australia shows that classroom-based mindfulness lessons for pre-school and school children can help aid the development of the executive function skill-set that is key to academic and social thriving, as well as build stress resilience. Two-thirds of 91 kindergarten to year two students were offered classroom-based mindfulness instruction during the first part of the study over a school term, with the remaining third being the control group, receiving lessons when the study was completed. The mindfulness practice included listening to the sound of a gong at set times each day, mindfulness activities such as reading, crafting, taking mindful moments and doing breathwork and body-scan exercises. At the end of the term, students in the mindfulness classrooms showed they were better able to pay attention, regulate their behaviour, move between tasks, plan, organise...
and monitor their responses than the control group. They also
demonstrated greater attention and concentration skills as well as more
prosocial behaviour.

Short Mindfulness Intervention

Another new study has revealed that just one week of meditation may help to erode the grip of negative emotions. Chinese researchers assigned 46 college students to either a mindfulness meditation intervention group or an emotion regulation education group. The meditation instructions comprised core concepts of mindfulness and the breath delivered via a short lecture on mindfulness theory followed by seven days of 15-minute audio-guided group meditation sessions. The emotion regulation education group attended a lecture on recognising and regulating their emotions, and practiced alone for 15 minutes every day for a week. Either side of the programmes, the groups completed questionnaires about their depression and anxiety symptoms and a computer test that evaluated their emotional intensity, memory and attention. In spite of depression and anxiety scores not changing much for either group, the meditation group showed better emotional memory and were less likely to be swayed by negative emotion. They also felt less emotional intensity than the
by negative emotion. They also felt less emotional intensity than the control group.

Stress Resilience in Firefighters

Another four-week MBAT programme assigned 131 firefighters to an MBAT group, a relaxation training group or a no-treatment control group. The MBAT firefighters received informal mindfulness instruction on concentration, body awareness, open monitoring and connection accompanied with audio-guided practices, completing at least one per day. The relaxation programme employed guided imagery, breathing exercises and progressive muscle relaxation as well as audio practices. Those in the MBAT group showed greater increases in psychological resilience than the other groups. Furthermore, the more time firefighters also spent practicing mindfulness at home, the more likely they were to increase their attention and positive mood.

Daily Body Scans

A new German study has found that a daily body scan may reduce the
impact of stress on the mind and body. Researchers assigned 47 young adults to either a body scan group that practiced a Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction body scan, or an audiobook control group that listened to a novel. Both teams listened to their recordings for 20 minutes a day for eight weeks. Strands of the participants’ hair were tested before and after the study to measure cortisol and DHEA, which are biomarkers of stress including long-term stress patterns. They also completed a questionnaire about their stress level. After eight weeks, cortisol levels were shown to decrease in the body scan group but increase in the audiobook group. The body scan group also showed a greater decrease in their cortisol to DHEA ratio, indicating less biological stress than the control group.

Mindfulness Outdoors

A new review of various studies suggests that combining time outdoors with mindfulness is more beneficial than just one or the other. The review examined 25 existing studies of nature-based mindfulness programmes ranging from 15 minutes to 90 days, and with outdoor spaces ranging from small gardens to expansive outdoor areas. The results found that mindfulness practice in natural settings generally produced positive effects. Informal mindfulness practices such as open awareness and those focusing on producing a mindful state as opposed to building a mindful disposition in the outdoors tended to produce better results than those
disposition in the outdoors tended to produce better results than those using formal meditation. The authors mused that experiencing the outdoors might lessen the mind’s tendency to wander, making it easier to remain in the present, as well as being out in the wild engendering “soft attention thereby allowing disengagement.”

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