Mindfulness Notes

Have you ever driven your car somewhere and arrived at your destination only to realize you remember nothing about your journey? Or started eating a packet of chips and then suddenly noticed all you had left in your hands was an empty packet? Most of us have!

These are some common examples of ‘mindlessness’ – A state we also often refer to as being on ‘autopilot.’

When we slip into autopilot (and research shows that the average person is in autopilot 47% of the time (1)) our attention is absorbed in our wandering minds and we are not really ‘present’ in our own lives.

Some teachers talk about autopilot as being a dreamlike state because in that mode we’re simply not fully ‘there’ in that moment.

In this busy, hyper connected world we live in it’s all too easy to lose ourselves in autopilot for much of the day….every day.

Living this way we often fail to notice the beauty of life, fail to hear what our bodies are telling us and we all too often become stuck in mechanical conditioned ways of thinking and living that may be harmful to ourselves or others.

On autopilot we tend to get lost in ‘doing’ so we find ourselves constantly striving and struggling and ‘getting stuff done’ instead of really living.

We also become vulnerable to anxiety, stress, depression and reactivity. Research shows, in fact, that the more our minds wander, the less happy we are (1).

What Is Mindfulness?

Mindfulness is the opposite of mindlessness.

It means waking up out of autopilot and ‘taking the steering wheel’ of our attention again.

We practice mindfulness by maintaining a moment-by-moment awareness of our thoughts, feelings, bodily sensations and the surrounding environment.

Mindfulness also involves non-judgment, meaning that we pay attention to our thoughts and feelings with the attitude of an impartial witness — without believing them or taking them personally.

Jon Kabat Zinn defines mindfulness as:

“Paying attention; On purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally.”

I like this definition because it allows us to see exactly what the components of mindfulness are. Through this definition Jon shows us that there are three specific ways in which our attention ‘shifts gears’ when we practice mindfulness.

Firstly our attention is held…

1. On Purpose

Mindfulness involves the conscious and deliberate direction of our attention.

When we’re on autopilot our attention is being swept up by a never ending (and not always positive) current of thought processes but when we’re mindful we ‘wake up’ and step out of that current, placing attention where we choose.

Another way of saying ‘on purpose’ is consciously. We are living more consciously, more awake, more fully ourselves when we pay attention in this way.

Secondly our attention is immersed…
2. In The Present Moment

If we leave it to its own devices our mind habitually wanders away from the present moment. It constantly gets caught up in the replaying the past and the projecting into the future. In other words, we’re very rarely fully present in the moment.

Mindful attention, however, is completely engaged in the present moment experience – the here and now. We let go of the tension caused by wanting things to be different, the tension of constantly wanting more, and instead we accept the present moment as it is.

And third, our attention is held…

3. Non Judgmentally

When practicing mindfulness we’re not aiming to control or suppress or stop our thoughts. We simply aim to pay attention to our experiences as they arise without judging or labelling them in any way.

Mindfulness then allows us to become the watcher of sense perceptions, thoughts and emotions as they arise without getting caught up in them and being swept away in their current.

Becoming the watcher in this way, we’re less likely to mechanically play out old habitual ways of thinking and living. It opens up a new freedom and choice in our lives.

How Do You Practice Mindfulness?

There are two forms of mindfulness practice. The first is the formal practice of mindfulness, which is commonly referred to as meditation.

A meditation practice is commonly done sitting, usually with eyes closed, but can also be done lying down or even walking. Some meditation practices also involve mantra (sound) or movement.

The informal practice is the rest of your life! You see, anything we do in daily life with full awareness can be said to be mindfulness practice.

You can do the dishes mindfully, wait at the traffic lights or go for your morning walk mindfully. Any routine activity can be made into a mindfulness practice when you bring your full attention to it.

What Can Mindfulness Do For You?

Thanks to research and exposure from the media, mindfulness is no longer hidden in ancient spiritual texts, monasteries and ashrams. Today, it is practiced by millions of people the world over.

It is now being taught in schools, in workplaces, in hospitals and in homes all over the world. As people continue to discover for themselves the incredible benefits of living mindfully, the interest continues to skyrocket.

There is now a huge body of research on the benefits of mindfulness.

Here are some of the proven ways that mindfulness can benefit you...

- Mindfulness reduces stress, anxiety and other destructive emotions (2). (Mindfulness actually shrinks the right pre-frontal cortex of the brain; this is the part of the brain responsible for so many destructive emotions like fear, unhappiness and anger.) (3)
- Mindfulness reduces depression (clinical trials are showing that mindfulness is as effective as medication with no side effects!). (4)
- Mindfulness reduces insomnia (4), increases your sense of well being (1), reduces lethargy and increases energy both mentally and physically.
Mindfulness is also very effective for pain management. (5)

Mindfulness sharpens your memory (6) and increases your focus and attention (7).

Mindfulness improves your emotional and social intelligence and develops your empathy and compassion (8). It is also shown to improve relationships (9).

Mindfulness improves health and boosts immunity (10). In fact, mindfulness is shown to have beneficial effects on many serious illnesses such as cancer and heart disease (11).

Mindfulness creates clearer, more focused thinking and improves efficiency at work and at home (6).

Mindfulness improves confidence and emotional resilience (12).

Mindfulness reduces compulsive and addictive tendencies (13) and has also been shown to work better than any diet for effective long-term weight loss (14).

Mindfulness turns out to also be the single most important determining factor in whether or not you will be happy in your life (once your survival needs are met).

**In other words, the more mindful you are the happier you are (1).**

Mindfulness can literally transform your entire world from the inside out and for the millions of mindfulness practitioners around the world it’s doing just that!

If you haven’t already, why not find out for yourself, the first hand, what it’s all about?

You might just discover the most incredible and wonderful surprise. That everything you’ve been searching for ‘out there’ — feelings of fulfillment, peace and wholeness — have been within you all along.

**Don’t miss this video!**

Also – check out this blog post to find out how I recently used mindfulness to deal with an extremely stressful situation.

**References**

(1) Harvard Gazette: Wandering mind not a happy mind
(2) A multi-method examination of the effects of mindfulness on stress attribution, coping and emotional well-being
(4) Greater good research digest: Mindfulness better than antidepressants
(5) Mindfulness based stress reduction clinical trial for insomnia
(6) Mindfulness improves cognition, including working memory study
(7) Mindfulness improves attentional control and focus study
(8) Mindfulness develops compassion and empathy study
(9) Mindfulness improves relationships study
(10) Mindfulness and immunity study
(11) Effects on mindfulness on heart disease study
(12) Mindfulness and resilience
(13) Mindfulness as a treatment for addiction
(14) Mindfulness, weight loss and treatment of obesity