

Mindfulness: Waking Up to What's in Front of You



Does it seem to you that despite a glut of “time saving” devices, the days, months and years fly by faster than ever? “What? It’s Christmas... already?” Our miraculous, ultra-complex brains have become so efficient at handling the demands of work, children, parents, social responsibility, and even our active and demanding recreational lives, that we can move through our days on auto-pilot, meeting our deadlines, fulfilling our responsibilities, keeping our heart rates up and our body fat down, and yet, with time flying by, somewhere inside many of us glimpse something elusive missing, despite our good work and our good fortune... One of the reasons I delved into the practice of mindfulness meditation was the poignant moment at the end of my father’s life, when his pained eyes met mine and he whispered, “Somehow, I just didn’t think it would all work out this way... where did the time go?”

Life is over before we know it. And life is simply- a series of moments. As George Carlin famously said, “Life is not measured by the number of breaths we take, but by the moments that take our breath away.” Mindfulness helps us live, *really live*, the moments of our lives in a deep and profoundly satisfying way. It is not just the latest bliss out fad, or a promise that pain and suffering will never come your way. Mindfulness practice gives us tools to deal with life’s difficulties, and helps us notice the exhaustion funnel before we are swallowed up by the pace of our own lives. In fact, recent neuroscientific research on the benefits of regular mindfulness practice is so exciting that mindfulness programs are springing up everywhere from the United States military to Harvard Medical school, to Google and other well-known corporations, and even Camarillo Yoga Center!

Physically, mindfulness meditation has been shown to reduce cortisol and blood pressure, and to improve the immune system and gastrointestinal health, among other wellness markers. Mindfulness practice has also been shown to boost attention and concentration, while reducing stress- inducing emotional reactivity, leading to improved resilience and confidence.

The word “practice” is key here. Jon Kabatt-Zinn, founding director of the Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction Clinic at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, is considered to be the grandfather of Mindfulness studies in the United States. In his words: “Mindfulness is the practice of paying attention, in the present moment, on purpose, and non-judgmentally.” And further, “Mindfulness is not merely a good idea: Oh yes, I will just be more present in my life, less judgmental, and everything will be better. Why didn’t that occur to me before?” Put simply, mindfulness requires practice to produce lasting and effective results.

Guidance and group support are helpful, and that’s why structured courses, like those used by neuroscientists, were created. At Camarillo Yoga Center, our Mindfulness Meditation courses are benefiting men and women of all ages and from all walks of life.

Many people have the idea that meditation means emptying the mind. “I can’t stop thinking for one minute, never mind sit down to meditate” is a common sentiment. Some people think of it as leaving the body, or worry about it being a religious practice. None of these is accurate, and this is why medical professionals, who recognize the validity and efficacy of the scientific research, recommend mindfulness meditation to reduce stress and improve health.

Focus begins with attention to our breathing, a natural process we take for granted. We note the thoughts, emotions, bodily sensations and background sounds that arise from moment to moment, observing them without analyzing, judging or pushing them away. As our moment by moment attention drifts into the narrative story of our lives (usually something from the past or future,) we gently guide our attention back to our direct experience, until the mind becomes quiet, like the still bottom of a lake, even though the winds of our minds create waves on the surface. It takes practice to experience this stillness and calm; mindfulness is a training for our brain, just like using weight resistance to train our muscles, so we build our practice muscles by sitting or lying down with attention for short periods.

We further develop our mindfulness practice with exercises that can be done all day long. This daily practice involves “waking up” to the life we have, noticing where our lives have slid into automatic pilot, opening our eyes to moments we take for granted, or miss altogether, and returning over and over again to direct experience. Many find this to be the elusive element we are missing in our whirlwind lives... the sweet, or bittersweet, never to arise again moments we miss, even though we are physically present... a smile on child’s face, a sunset, an unfulfilled need reflected in our partner’s eyes, a moment of deep satisfaction for a job we have done well... as John Lennon said, “life is what happens while we’re busy making other plans.” Fulfillment arises from showing up for our lives, and living them as though they really matter.

Try this Mindful Wake-Up!

Instead of throwing the covers back and racing out of bed, or burying your head for 5 more minutes of sleep, try waking up to the life you have for a few minutes. When your eyes open in the morning, become aware of the breath entering your body. Feel the breath as though you could breathe all the way through your skin, gently enlivening your whole body. Take a moment to recognize that you are alive for the gift of another day. Spend a moment in gratitude for your shelter, for the safety of those who share your home, and whatever else comes to mind. Make the first moments upon waking a remembrance of what is really important... health, safety, love.. so that you can keep your perspective and walk with confidence through the rest of the day.



Copyright 2013: Audrey Walzer