

Rebalance^{MD}

Mindfulness and Mindfulness Meditation

Being aware, in the present moment, without judgement.

Sounds easy, right?

We pay attention all the time to everything we do, like driving the car, cooking dinner, brushing our teeth. Well, maybe my mind wanders sometimes when I'm brushing my teeth...

Our complex brains have a wonderful capacity to remember the past, plan for the future, consider complicated problems and analyze solutions. These are incredibly useful skills and serve us well at times. If we are building a rocket ship, researching health care solutions, or even planning what to make for dinner, these skills are invaluable. When these thoughts become ruminations and incessant worry, they don't serve us well at all.

And when this kind of analytic thinking becomes all we do, we miss out on the present moment, which is where we actually live our lives. Our brains and bodies have the capacity to be aware of what's going on around us right now, perhaps noticing whether the chair you are sitting in is comfortable or not, perhaps noticing the sun shining in the window or the sound of the rain, or perhaps noticing if you're feeling hungry or full. Our senses give us feedback all the time about the present moment. Our challenge is to show up and pay attention.

The mindfulness movement in western medicine began at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, with Jon Kabat-Zinn, a scientist who sought to bring eastern meditation traditions to the west for the purpose of stress reduction. He started 8-week courses teaching Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR). These courses have spread around the world, and are the most researched meditation programs, showing benefits in treating of chronic pain, anxiety, depression, and many other areas. Many other mindfulness programs and practices have also developed.

Mindfulness practice is now being researched in the orthopaedic world. A recent Australian study showed that patients who did the MBSR program before joint replacement had significantly lower pain after their surgery, as well as improved function of their joints, with effects that lasted a year or more. Mindfulness training has been shown to decrease pain associated with osteoarthritis, improve coping with pain, and improve quality of life.

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How does it work?

Mindfulness practice allows us to be present in this moment and moderate our stress response. We can move from “fight or flight” to “rest, digest, and heal”. This decreases stress hormones in our system including cortisol, epinephrine, CRP, and IL-6, and decreases our burden of inflammation. Functional MRI shows structural changes in the brain after even 8 weeks of meditation with increases in grey matter and prefrontal cortex associated with rational response. Decreases are seen in the amygdala associated with fear response. So, mindfulness helps with emotional regulation, and the ability to respond thoughtfully, rather than react mindlessly to our situations. Many people find it easier to appreciate the positives that are present in our lives, and access gratitude and joy.

Where to start?

We are hoping to be able to bring Mindfulness training to ReBalanceMD soon, whether in person or online. In the meantime, there are many wonderful resources available online.

Try a Short Exercise:

Sit comfortably in a chair in a place where you won't be disturbed for a few minutes. Notice any thoughts feelings or sensation that you are aware of. Put one hand on your belly and one hand on your chest. Close your eyes and sit quietly for a moment. Notice how your hands are moving on your body as you breathe. Most of us take quite shallow breaths most of the time, especially if we are stressed or in pain. We are bracing for fight or flight. Now try to gently increase the depth of your breathing, so you notice your hand on your belly rise and then your hand on your chest rise as you inhale. Allow your breath to release so your hand on your chest falls and then your hand on your belly falls. Allow your exhalation to be a little bit longer than your inhalation. Try taking several deeper breaths in this manner. If your mind wanders, which is normal, return your attention back to your breathing, noticing the movement of your hands with your breath. After several breaths, notice how you are feeling now. You have started to allow yourself to rest and focus on the breathing. This is the beginning of mindfulness meditation.

To experiment with a meditation practice, have a look at some of these resources, and give them a try. Some people start to notice some benefits right away and in others it takes longer. An ongoing practice will yield more benefits over time.

BCALM is the BC Association for Living Mindfully. This is a nonprofit organization found by Victoria GP, Dr Mark Sherman. Their mindfulness training programs are currently on hold due to Covid-19 concerns. However, they have information and resources on their website at bcalm.ca. Check out their resource page and download their meditation tracks for free.

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Mindfulness on your smart phone...might be an oxymoron. Or maybe not? Here are some great apps that can get you started meditating.

“Headspace” is an app that has been researched more than any other and shows positive outcomes. Headspace Basic gives you 10 sessions for free, then you can subscribe if you want to.

Other helpful apps:

Happify

Smiling Mind

Calm

Insight Timer

Mindfulness daily

UCLA Mindful

Ten Percent Happier

Here is a wonderful article about sleep and mindfulness, with recommendations for YouTube meditations for insomnia: <https://www.lifehack.org/844530/best-guided-meditation-for-sleep>

Books:

“Mindfulness for Beginners” by Jon Kabat-Zinn

“The Miracle of Mindfulness” by Thich Naht Hanh

“The Little Book of Mindfulness” by Patrizia Collard