

Living in the Present Moment: The Practice of Mindfulness meditation as a remedy for stress

Today more than ever, people in Australia and the western world suffer from high levels of stress, anxiety, and depression. It is now widely recognised that the cost of this on individuals and societies is huge, and so the reduction of stress, anxiety, and depression remains a major public health challenge. On an individual level, high levels of stress, anxiety, and depression can result in reduced quality of life, strained relationships and difficulty performing at work. On a social and economic level the costs are also significant, with psychological disturbance (depression) being the largest single cause of disability in Australia. Physical health is also adversely affected with psychological distress being associated with hypertension and heart disease, and poorer treatment outcome for a range of diagnoses. We also know that physical illness is associated with increased vulnerability to stress, anxiety, and depression, and so there are many people in today's society in a vicious cycle of poor physical and/or psychological health.

In the hope of improving treatment outcome for various psychological and physical problems, western researchers have begun to look to eastern practices for suggestions. Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) is a treatment that has recently gained interest from western scientific communities. Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy is a meditation-based intervention designed to help reduce the psychological distress associated with a wide range of psychiatric and medical diagnoses. Mindfulness-based approaches have demonstrated effectiveness in reducing anxiety and stress, improving quality of life, and managing difficult emotions associated with chronic illness and chronic pain. It is an approach that is increasingly being adapted for a variety of problems. For example, locally, Mark Craigie at Curtin University has recently completed a series of PhD studies that support the use of Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy in patients with generalised anxiety disorder. In the USA, Mindfulness-based approaches have been used in general medical hospitals to assist people in dealing with the distress associated with chronic medical conditions. In the UK, a major focus has been the use of Mindfulness in the prevention of recurrent depression.

Mindfulness Meditation has been practiced for centuries and borrows from Buddhist meditative practices. It involves becoming more aware of present moment experience in an accepting and non-judgemental way. It is about getting out of the 'doing mode' that we often spend so much time in, and rather, getting into 'being mode'. So often life is spent rushing from one moment to the next, and for people with chronic psychiatric or medical conditions this can be dangerous because warning signs are not picked up and acted upon in a helpful manner. The enhanced awareness of the present moment taught in Mindfulness can lead to people learning to quickly recognise and skilfully respond to difficult or painful experiences, and thereby "nip in the bud" unhelpful ways of reacting to distress before they escalate. Mindfulness meditation can also result in life being experienced more fully and richly because it is really *noticed* rather than rushed through.

MBCT sessions are skills based classes. The MBCT program focuses on developing mindfulness skills, and a more proactive and accepting approach to life's challenges. Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy includes breathing meditations and yoga stretches to

help participants become more aware of the present moment, including getting in touch with moment-to-moment changes in the mind and the body. In eight weekly sessions, and by listening to CDs at home on a daily basis, participants learn the practice of mindfulness meditation.

A core aim of Mindfulness-based approaches is for participants to learn to stay in touch with the present moment, without ruminating about the past, or worrying about the future. The skill that participants learn is to disengage from vicious cycles of negative thinking.

Further, Mindfulness-based approaches aim to improve concentration, help participants become more aware of automatic reactions to difficulties and distress, teach skills that promote acceptance of unwanted thoughts and feelings, and teach skills that help participants choose helpful responses to unpleasant thoughts, feelings, or situations.

A wide range of people may benefit from Mindfulness Based Approaches, including those suffering from stress, mild to moderate depression, chronic pain and illness, anxiety, sleep disturbances, high blood pressure and headaches.

Private Clinics Australia is running a pilot series of Mindfulness Programs in West Perth. Programs consist of eight weekly classes held on a weekday evening. Classes will contain between 6 and 8 participants. The next program will commence February 2006. Due to the research and pilot nature of these initial groups, they will be run at a nominal cost to participants. For further information please contact: Dr Melissa Ree, Clinical Psychologist/Research Director, Private Clinics Australia, Ph: 9285 2722, e-mail: mjree@privateclinics.com.au
