

Benefits of Mindfulness Meditation

by Shinzen Young

Increased Appreciation of Life Levels Reduced Suffering Elevated Performance
Effects on Health Improved Interpersonal Relationships
Catalyzing Inner Growth

Increased Appreciation of Life

A person with high base-line attentiveness finds, in general, all life activities to be more fulfilling. Intrinsically pleasant experiences (food, music, sexuality, etc.) are vastly more intense and satisfying simply because one is more fully "in the moment." Furthermore, ordinary, banal experiences (washing dishes, driving to work, social conversation, etc.) take on a quality of extraordinary vibrancy and fascination. Boredom becomes a thing of the past.

Reduced Suffering

Physical Pain

Dealing with pain from illness or injury becomes a major issue for most people sometime in their lives. Indeed for millions of chronic pain victims, it is *the* issue of every moment of their lives. When analgesics and medical treatment cannot mitigate the pain, what option is left? Must one be subject to meaningless, abject suffering? Absolutely not. It has been clinically demonstrated that in states of sufficiently high concentration, pain, even very acute pain, can be dissolved into a kind of moving energy. This greatly diminishes ones suffering in the moment.

More importantly, when one learns to experience pain in this way, one actually gets a sense of being empowered and even nurtured by it. Thus, meditation skills provide not merely a mode of pain management, but allow one to experience pain as deeply meaningful in the sense of contributing to personal growth and empowerment.

Emotional Pain, Compulsions and Addictions

What is true for physical pain is also true for emotional pain such as fear, grief, anger, jealousy, shame, etc.

Using mindfulness skills, one can clearly detect and discriminate the mental images, internal words and body sensations that constitute the negative emotion as they arise moment by moment. By "deconstructing" the emotion in this way, one becomes less caught up while at the same time allowing the emotion to flow without suppression.

The same skills can be applied to overcoming negative habits and compulsive behaviors such as alcohol, tobacco and drug abuse, eating disorders and so forth, "staying with" the unwholesome urge until it weakens and passes.

Furthermore, the mindfulness itself produces a kind of "intrinsic high" which can replace the unhealthy high of substance and alcohol addiction.

Elevated Performance Levels

Any task is performed more effectively (and joyously!) if one is mindful and focused. These include:

1. More efficient studying for students

2. Increased ability in intellectual pursuits and problem solving

3. Acquisition of skills (languages, performing arts, fine arts, martial arts, etc.)

4. Sports - In sports, heightened attentiveness affects performance in two ways. First, the better you focus, the better your game. Some athletes occasionally spontaneously enter into unusually focused states. The locker room term for this is "being in the zone." With systematic training in focusing skills, athletes can learn to consistently perform "in the zone."

Second, focus and equanimity affects sports in the area of endurance. As explained above in the Physical Pain section, high focus imparts the ability to experience pain with reduced suffering. The ability to "break up" the subjective discomfort of fatigue leads to an increase in objective energy which could potentially give a winning edge. Acquiring such an edge through mental concentration represents an attractive alternative for the temptation to gain that edge through drugs.

5. Work - Japanese corporations have long recognized that focused workers are not only more effective, but are happier and more fulfilled because there is an intrinsic pleasure associated with any task done in a highly focused state, even seemingly boring and repetitive tasks. To this end, it is not unusual for big companies to send an entire section of workers to a Zen temple for a week of monastic training.

Effects on Health

1. States of high attentiveness and deep relaxation involve not only the mind but also affect the body and therefore impact one's health. Brain alpha waves increase, skin conductivity decreases and the metabolism becomes more efficient.
2. Mindfulness helps people be more in contact with and hence more responsive to their bodies.
3. Heightened attentiveness also greatly increases the "high" associated with running and other forms of health-promoting exercises, thus making exercise easier and more appealing.

Improved Interpersonal Relationships At Work And Home

Mindfulness skills impact this arena in two ways. First, they allow one to be more "present" with people, more engaged and less drawn into fantasy and projection moment by moment. Second, they provide a tool to reduce the effects of negative emotions which often get in the way of successful interpersonal communication.

Catalyzing Inner Growth

Most people participate in some form of inner growth process. These include introspection, psychotherapy, body work, self-improvement and motivational seminars, yoga, tai chi, 12-step programs, prayer life, etc. In general all such personal growth processes are vastly more effective when done in a state of heightened mindfulness and equanimity. Attention skill is to personal growth as a catalyst is to a chemical reaction; it dramatically speeds up the rate of the process.

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