



Short communication

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Everyday Mindfulness: More Accessible Than You Think

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Abstract

Mindfulness, the practice of nonjudgmental awareness, is rooted in Buddhist traditions. Although it originates from Eastern theology, it is also accessible and beneficial to those in Western cultures. Many individuals are aware of mindfulness, sati, in the context of yoga practices. However, mindfulness has a multitude of applications and is not bound to a particular discipline. The practice of mindfulness in the secular form has been incorporated into formal programs, such as Loving Kindness Meditation (LKM), Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), Cognitively-Based Compassion Training (CBCT), and Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT). Through these programs, mindfulness serves many purposes, such as spiritual practices, physical symptom management, and mental health improvement. Individuals may also choose less structured ways to integrate mindfulness into their everyday activities. The nonjudgmental awareness that mindfulness encourages allows for psychological, physiological, and relational improvement. When individuals consider mindfulness as a way of being, it becomes much more accessible.

Keywords: Mindfulness; Mental Health; Physical Health; Healing; Awareness

Introduction

Mindfulness, sati, remains a component of Vipassana and Samatha yoga that has been retained by Western culture both on and off the mat. It invites practitioners to focus on an internal awareness of constructed experiences [1]. Depending on the personal foundation for the practice, the intention of mindfulness is for ultimate liberation or, as seen primarily in Western practice, psychological or physical symptom management [2]. While there are many benefits of a mindfulness practice, there remain many barriers to incorporating it into an American lifestyle. Barriers to exploring a mindful practice could be seen in the roots of the practice itself. The Buddhist spiritual and religious underlying assumptions of mindfulness might be a deterrent for some. Furthermore, the Western expectations for rigorous work schedules and an emphasis on productivity and "doing" rather than "being" can result in a lack of time for a formal mindfulness practice. However, the psychological and physical benefits of mindfulness outweigh the barriers to practicing. Mindfulness can exist within and without Buddhism. An effective mindfulness practice is also accessible to Westerners within schedules where time is sparse for a formal practice.

Mindfulness Effectiveness Within and Outside Buddhism

Mindfulness can be effectively used within and outside of a Buddhist context. Within Buddhist Dharma, the practitioner undergoes mindfulness and other meditative practices towards awakening, total liberation of clinging and suffering. The shape Buddhism takes globally is culturally dependent and, in the West, Americans have altered it to some degree [3]. While some Westerners practice mindfulness within the overarching context of Buddhism, it can also be practiced under secular assumptions. The Dalai Lama, while not wanting to see mindfulness reduced down to the total essence of Buddhism, has also been receptive to the invitation of the practice undergoing scientific scrutiny [4]. Through this process, a handful of secular mindfulness-based programs have been subject to quantitative and qualitative research to assess for effectiveness.

Many of these secular, mindfulness-based programs are accessible through in person experiences or even through technology such as YouTube. These programs offer mindfulness

through either focused attention (FA) or open monitoring (OM) [5]. Loving Kindness Meditation (LKM) is a focused attention compassion-based meditation practice that invites participants to direct loving-kindness towards themselves and then others [6]. Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) uses open monitoring to increase well-being and creating awareness around psychological and physical experiences as they happen [7]. MBSR has shown effectiveness in reducing cardiac patients' systolic BP, perceived stress, and anger [8]. Cognitively-Based Compassion Training (CBCT) is a secular adaptation of Buddhist mindfulness practices where participants engage in contemplative exercises towards compassion [9]. Mindfulness has also shown to reduce pain stemming from a variety of illness or physical complaints [10, 11].

Among the disciplines that have shown interest in the benefits of adapting Eastern practices, professional counselors have embraced mindfulness in treatment modalities with clients, students in counselor education training programs, supervisees, and in overall counselor-wellness. Counseling research has consistently shown that mindfulness helps to reduce psychopathology and increase a sense of wellness [12]. Linehan (1993) developed Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) based on acceptance and mindfulness practices as a treatment method for managing difficult moods and the resulting behaviors [13]. DBT continues to remain an effective modality among professional counselors. Mindfulness exercises have also been woven into counselor educator curriculum. Intentional use of mindfulness has shown to have a strong relationship with multicultural competency and knowledge in counseling students [14]. Mindfulness also has implications for reducing burnout in professional counselors themselves [15].

In many of the programs offering mindfulness, healing is typically defined as equanimity with any experience, not necessarily being cured from it [16]. While instructions typically direct participants to not hold onto expectations or goals for their mindfulness exercise, research has found the practice to produce significant results. This, perhaps, can make mindfulness a more palatable practice for Westerners by providing a space for healing without a cure while also being supported by scientific evidence for the psychological and physical benefits of the practice. So, if a mindfulness practice is advantageous with or without the Buddhist underpinnings, how accessible is it within the time constrained American climate?

Mindfulness as Intentional Living

The essence of mindfulness practice is living in a state of awareness without judgment. Operating from this understanding, mindfulness is easily accessible. For example, explore the typical Westerner workday. Workdays often start with waking up, grooming oneself, having breakfast – or just coffee—traveling to work, and starting the work. Each of these activities are opportunities to practice nonjudgmental awareness. This awareness is an acknowledgement of the physical sensations, mental processes, emotional states, and even spiritual states.

Waking up in the morning is an opportune time to take a note of the present state of being. Taking an internal body scan of physical sensations from the head to the toes is a helpful way of reintegrating the mind and the body. During this process, it is helpful to solely acknowledge the places on the body that hold discomfort and the places on the body that hold comfort. This awareness is done without judgment and simply allows the person to make an adjustment if needed.

The grooming process is another opportunity to unite the mind and body in their present state. The mindful individual brushes the teeth while acknowledging the sensations of that process. The sensations would include the motion of the hand brushing the teeth, the sound the toothbrush makes as it strokes the teeth, the flavor of the toothpaste, and the placement of the feet on the ground while brushing. All of this is experienced within a simple two-minute process that is already built into the day. Similar awareness can be applied to drinking coffee, eating a meal, or driving to work. Thinking of mindfulness as a way of being and not a separate activity, makes the practice much more accessible.

As mindfulness is a way of being, it also applies to interpersonal interactions. The awareness and nonjudgment encouraged by mindfulness practices allows for improved relations on all levels. Being more aware of the present state of one's mind, body, emotions, and spirit allow for more purposeful interactions. Therefore, mindfulness not only reintegrates internal experiences to offer a more functional state of being, it allows individuals to operate with more synergy to improve relational functioning.

Though mindfulness may have at one time been perceived as a solely religious practice or only for the professional yogis, the concept of a mindful approach to living is much more universal, being used in a wide variety of settings. A mindfulness practice starts with the individual and extends to experiences outside of the individual. There are many formal practices for mindfulness that may appeal more to those searching for a structured approach while there are other casual approaches that still gather the essence of mindfulness and provide similar benefits.

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Conflict of interest

No conflict of interest.

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