

Mindfulness for the Aging Mind

Dr. A.M. Hill

Mindfulness is the purposeful practice of being aware to the present moment without judgement or the need to adjust or change anything. It is the disciplined exercise or drill of ridding the mind of thoughts, centering and relaxing the self, and taking slow deep breaths, clearing body-mind- psyche of feelings, beliefs and tensions. There are many different forms of mindfulness practice. Mindful meditation such as TM or transcendental meditation, loving-kindness meditation, Vipassana and Zen Buddhist practices, mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT), mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR), contemplative meditation, and spiritual meditation are some of the more notable practices.

Mindfulness can assist the aging mind in dealing with many types of stresses whose origins may be physical, psychological, social, spiritual, financial, or environmental. It is quite normal to be under several forms of stress contemporaneously or at the same time. Depression (mental stress), accompanying chronic illnesses (physical stress), further exacerbated by money problems (financial stress) from rising medical care, is an example of three different types of life stressors. Aging with arthritis, and living in an unhealthy, unsupportive, environment is another example.

Our resources whether monetary, physical capacity, environmental, or social network can become stretched to the limit, dwindle, stop functioning optimally, or even cease to exist in a form that would best meet our needs as we age. Some things in life we can change. Many things we cannot. Realistically, we have to live within the context of our means. As a method of therapeutic intervention, mindfulness helps us become more capable of adapting to life's vicissitudes. The daily practice of mindfulness can help us to live better within the context of personal life situation, capabilities, and resources.

Mindful awareness is giving focused attention to a task (great or small; being or doing) while remaining conscious for mental lapses such as mind wandering or intrusive thoughts that take you off-task. "Mindful self-awareness is central to mindfulness meditation and plays a key role in its salutary effects"⁽¹²⁾. Activities most used in conjunction with mindfulness include breathing exercises, body scan,

guided meditation (sitting or lying), yoga, and mindful walking. More and more research is being conducted on the utility, uses, and benefits of mindfulness, substantiating previous anecdotal evidence.

So what have we found to date about mindfulness? Mindfulness can improve mood and emotional well-being ⁽¹⁾, lower emotional distress ^(4, 16), reduced cognitive reactivity ⁽¹⁴⁾, reduce feelings of loneliness ^(3, 8), mediate symptoms of depression ^(5, 19), lower anxiety ⁽⁶⁾, lower blood pressure ^(8, 15), and improve pain management ⁽⁹⁾.

Life stress is a significant predictor of physical health and mental health ⁽⁴⁾. As a meditative practice, the essential goal of mindfulness is to help one achieve a physiological state of reduced metabolic activity ⁽¹⁰⁾. This in turn elicits physical and mental relaxation ⁽⁷⁾, enhanced psychological balance and well-being ⁽²¹⁾ and emotional stability ⁽²²⁾. By regulating your thoughts and attention, you gain a sense of calmness and moments of freedom from the chaos of life. This would be particularly important to an aging caregiver.

Aging caregivers often experience declines in self-care, social interactions with others, and a lack of intervening help with care duties. Psychosocial stress from tending to the needs of others and the reduction in positive, relaxing and enjoyable interactions and hobbies is a common experience for caregivers. Mindfulness practice lessens caregiver stress, brings greater ease into dementia and other disability care, helps us think better about ourselves and helps us think better about those in our care.

The practice of meditation also boosts neural connectivity ⁽¹¹⁾, reduces mind-wandering ⁽²³⁾, lowers stress levels ⁽¹⁷⁾ and promotes quality sleep ^(2, 13, 24).

Contemplative Aging: A Way of Being in Later Life ⁽²⁰⁾ makes good use of meditative practices as does Aging as a Spiritual Practice ⁽¹⁸⁾.

Goodness notwithstanding, mindfulness is not a panacea and no one specific form of meditative practices work for all. You may have to try several methods to see what works best for you. Whatever you do, remember to always first consult with your family, trusted friend, knowledgeable practitioner and primary care physician first so that you may share information and concerns on best health practices for the mind-body-spirit.

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