Mindfulness is practiced in kindergarten classrooms and military training exercises, in prison programs and corporate cubicles as a way to reduce stress and improve focus. Its roots are in Buddhism, and the Chinese character for mindfulness means “presence of heart.” Mindfulness means being aware of one’s thoughts, emotions and physical sensations. It means paying attention with all your senses, to what’s going on within and around you. It’s a simple idea, as simple as breathing.

During mindfulness meditation, you accept and acknowledge feelings as they arise. You become an observer of the flow of your thoughts, feelings and bodily sensations, without judging them. As practice brings an improved sense of well-being, mindfulness becomes something you do without thinking about it.

The art of not overthinking
The word “ruminate” comes from a Latin word that means “chew the cud.” It’s like we’re chewing on the same thoughts over and over. We think and rethink about a problem past the point where it’s helpful in arriving at a solution. In that sense, mindfulness may be the opposite of overthinking. Studies have shown that people who practice mindfulness tend to ruminate less. It fosters a sense of calm and well-being, enhancing our ability to find clarity and to focus on the task at hand.

Mindfulness has many benefits, both physical and emotional. It reduces stress, which is good for mind and body. It helps people be less emotionally reactive and more satisfied in their relationships. Mindfulness is good for our brains, boosting memory, improving our focus and helping us be more nimble in our thinking. By being more mindful and living in the moment, we are better able to engage with others and in turn better enhance our quality of life and relationships.

In addition to reducing stress, mindfulness meditation has been shown to:
- Boost the immune system
- Help treat heart disease
- Lower blood pressure
- Reduce chronic pain
- Improve sleep
- Relieve digestive problems
- Fight depression
- Help treat substance abuse, eating disorders, anxiety and obsessive-compulsive disorders

While scientific research has shown the many physical and mental benefits of mindfulness, some believe the social benefits have even greater value. Chade-Meng Tan believes mindfulness has the potential to bring world peace. Tan, an early engineer at Google, is the author of Search Inside Yourself: The Unexpected Path to Achieving Success, Happiness (and World Peace). He created a mindfulness-based emotional intelligence curriculum for Google. Tan says mindfulness has the potential to unlock inner peace, joy and compassion.

The UCLA (University of California, Los Angeles) Mindful Awareness Research Center offers free guided meditations that you can listen to at your computer or download as 3- to 20-minute podcasts. Samples include a breathing meditation, a loving kindness meditation, and a meditation to help you sleep.

UCLA Mindful Awareness Research Center
http://marc.ucla.edu/body.cfm?id=22
Like Google, in the past few years, many companies have started to offer mindfulness programs to their employees, to help them be more fully present and make better decisions. Advocates of the practice say they feel calmer and more content. Research shows that mindfulness meditation lowers cortisol levels in the blood. Cortisol is known as the stress hormone, so when levels drop, the mind becomes calmer and more focused.

Practicing mindfulness

To get an idea of what it’s like, try this simple exercise:

• Sit on a chair or cross-legged on the floor. Get comfortable.

• Focus on one aspect of your breathing — the air flowing in and out of your nostrils, or your belly rising as you inhale and falling as you exhale.

• After a minute or so, expand your focus. What sounds are you aware of? What sensations are you feeling in your body? What thoughts cross your mind?

• Without judging anything as good or bad, reflect on each thought or sensation. If you get distracted, re-focus on your breathing before expanding your awareness again.

It may be helpful to do a guided meditation, like those offered online by the UCLA Mindful Awareness Research Center (see sidebar on previous page). Put on a set of headphones and try it at your desk. The more you practice, the more natural it feels to take a few minutes to focus.

Practice being mindful while performing simple tasks, like brushing your teeth or washing the dishes. When out for a walk, be aware of your feet connecting with the earth. Be grateful for the body that carries you. Use all your senses to take in your surroundings. Smell the flowers that are blooming or the snow as it’s melting, hear the sounds of the birds or the rumble of a plane. Don’t judge the smells, sounds or your own thoughts as good or bad, just accept them. Be present for them. Be mindful of them. Breathe.

Resources

www.liveandworkwell.com

To access articles and resources on this topic, search liveandworkwell.com using words like “stress,” “meditation” and “mindfulness.” Find a therapist in your area by using the “Search for Clinician” link.

Ask your health benefits representative for your access code to liveandworkwell.com.

The information, advice, treatments and therapeutic approaches in this article are provided for informational and educational purposes only. Consult with your doctor or mental health provider for specific health care needs, treatment or medications. Certain treatments may not be covered under your benefit, so check with your health plan regarding your coverage of services. We do not recommend or endorse any treatment, medication, suggested approach, specific or otherwise, nor any organization, entity, or resource material that may be named herein. Except for Liveandworkwell.com, no other site identified herein is affiliated or controlled by us. You will be subject to the terms of use, privacy terms and policies of any site you may visit.

6. Ibid.

© 2015 liveandworkwell.com

OPTPRJ4073  39128-042014