

MINDFULNESS AND FULFILLMENT

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I have noticed recently whether I am watching television, reading a magazine or looking at social media the current buzz word is “mindfulness”. When looking at changing behavior and the desire for a more fulfilled life, how can mindfulness help support a new path?

What is mindfulness and why is it useful? Jon Kabat-Zinn, PhD, founding director of the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, defines mindfulness in his book “Full Catastrophe Living” as “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment and nonjudgmentally.” When looking at the process of changing behavior it can be helpful in a number of ways, including:

1. Begins the practice of non-judgement. Observing without judgement allows for more clarity and the ability to approach experiences with curiosity thereby interrupting a behavioral pattern. When experiencing unpleasant emotions turning to judgement such as “I shouldn’t feel this way”, “I am bad”, “I am stupid” only serve to perpetuate a cycle. The cycle typically follows this pattern: feel an unpleasant emotion, judge the experience, feel bad related to the judgement, avoid or numb it and then feel bad about the related behavior. This cycle brings back the unpleasant emotion and the process starts all over. This can result in a repeated return to behaviors such as over-eating, over-spending and the use of drugs or alcohol. Non-judgement looks like: “I feel sad, I wonder what is making me sad, what brought on this feeling of sadness” etc.
2. Allows us to appreciate and live in the present moment. By staying grounded in what is happening now and what you are feeling increases the ability to tolerate discomfort knowing it will pass.
3. Encourages compassion for self and others. If you can bring in compassion to yourself and remove judgement it makes relating to other people easier. Labels and judgement separate us from ourselves and from other people because they are a barrier to connection.
4. Increases self-awareness. By observing your “self” with curiosity you can learn your patterns and triggers that will create a space for change.

Some simple steps to practicing mindfulness are:

1. Take a deep breath and allow for some expansiveness to fill your chest and body making room for an emotion. You can try breathing in for a count of four through your nose and out for a count of four through your nose.
2. Notice what you are feeling and name it. Be specific in your description. Rather than defaulting to common feeling words such as mad, sad, good, happy, guilty, look deeper such as disregarded, vulnerable, shamed, fulfilled, confident, important etc.
3. Identify where you feel the emotion in your body. For example, "I am feeling disregarded and I am noticing it feels like a tightness in my throat." Learning where you carry emotions in your body will help increase your overall awareness and is a tool to connect the mind and body.
4. Identify where the feeling is coming from without judgement. Did something recently happen? Did a current situation bring up an old emotion?
5. Imagine sending the breath to the part of your body where the emotion lives. If you feel tightness in your throat imagine the breath going to your throat and allowing the area to soften.

After completing this exercise for the amount of time you have designated (1 minute, 15 minutes etc.) come back to the present. Once you have made space by moving out unpleasant emotions, you can practice taking in positive experiences throughout your day.

I often talk about looking at these positive experiences as marbles and your job is to fill up your marble jar with positive experiences. Positive experiences can be as varied and abundant as you allow. For example, a phone call from a friend, someone holding the door for you, the smell of coffee, sunshine, a hug, music, a bath etc. Take the time to notice these things throughout your day and let the feeling resonate. You can also write the positive experiences down on pieces of paper, roll them up and put them in a jar for later.

Through the practice of mindfulness you will notice things may start to shift for you. When you fill up the inside with positive experiences and gratitude you will start to attract more positive experiences and people into your life. This change I believe occurs because your attention will shift and you will naturally start to gravitate to people and experiences more in line with your internal world.

Don't get discouraged if the change doesn't happen overnight or if you have trouble initially observing and being curious about your emotions. You didn't get to this point in your life overnight, and developing new habits takes practice. The keywords to remember with mindfulness is practice and possibility. It is a practice and something you will use daily. Some days will be easier than others. Start by simply being open to the idea that change and feeling better is possible. Not the idea that you will or must or have to, but simply that it is possible.

Anything is possible...

Until next time, "The spirit in me honors the spirit in you." Namaste