

The “Here and Now” Road to a Mindful & Healthy Lifestyle

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In the past few years, the concept of "Mindfulness" has gained popularity as well as acceptability in the Healthcare Space. "Mindfulness is becoming recognized by leading Medical Schools as a beneficial practice for their students, residents, and faculty". (15) The Mindfulness Institute (<http://www.mindfulnessinstitute.ca/>) describes mindfulness as "ubiquitous-a natural part of being human". The most famous researcher of mindful meditation, Jon-Kabat Zinn, who is also the founder of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) explains, "Mindfulness is awareness that arises through paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, non-judgmentally. It's about knowing what is on your mind". (14) Scott Bishop, who is a well-known psychologist, has a similar definition of mindfulness, that is a "non-elaborative, nonjudgmental, present-centered awareness in which each thought, feeling, sensation that arises ... is acknowledged and accepted as it is". (7)

There is science as well as research behind Mindfulness. Research scientists have been studying its effect on one's physical health and as well as psychosocial

health. The American Mindfulness Research Association, the Center for Mindfulness, University of Massachusetts Medical School, and the Center for Investigating Healthy Minds have been providing updated research about Mindfulness. (19)

Dr. Travis Stork explains the importance of reading labels, choosing portion sizes, grocery shopping, meal planning, choosing foods, eating, timing, tasting, appreciating the natural flavor, and focusing on the body's reaction to food. He emphasizes "When you're mindful, you become more aware of the options you have, and you fully understand and accept that the decisions you make influence your health and well-being". (17) Brady discusses how to incorporate mindfulness in an exercise regimen. He explains that with a mindful exercise routine, "it's possible to merge awareness and physical exercise together as one. This allows you to experience the present moment during your physical activity". (4) Katz emphasizes that one needs to "tune into" the five senses (taste, sight, sound, touch, smell) to reach a state of mindfulness. (8) Practicing mindfulness and meditation include setting the time, observing the present moment, leaving our judgments behind, continuously returning to the present moment, and "recognizing when your mind has wandered off, and gently bring it back". (9)

So what does this really mean? And how does it all relate to one's health? Dr. Sunil Daniel, an Obesity and Nutrition Science expert, explains the effects of mindfulness practice, "Early results from studies in the areas of behavioral health

(such as anxiety and mood disorders, substance abuse, and eating disorders) and chronic and lifestyle diseases (such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes, certain cancers, obesity, and overweight) have been positive". He also describes the "core components of a mindfulness-based eating program" and the tips to incorporate mindfulness in one's life. (6) Mindful Living involves mindful eating, exercise, meditation and reflection, and using one's mind and senses. The "Wheel of Mindful Living", which depicts the positive health outcomes of a mindful lifestyle, shows the circular and continuous relationship between mindful eating, exercise, mind & senses, and meditation & reflection. It also explains that one needs to take charge of his/her own health and be a driver on the "Here and Now" road.

Mindful living is crucial for one's physical health as well as psychological health.

Adopting a Mindful Lifestyle, namely living in the "here and now" leads to an increase in disease prevention, weight loss & maintenance, memory, attention span, focus, sleep, and mood. In addition, practicing mindfulness results in a decrease in obesity, pain, stress, anxiety, and loneliness. (3) A real-life example that explains this is the inspiring story of Marcus Aurelius Anderson, TEDx and Keynote Speaker and author of "The Gift of Adversity". He explains "I turned 40 years old bedridden and paralyzed, wondering if I was ever going to be able to walk and use my hands again. In 2012, while preparing to deploy with the US Army, I suffered a severe spinal injury that left me paralyzed and I died on the operating table twice. After months of brutal self-reflection, I was able to shift my mindset to empowerment and 360

Gratitude; it literally changed my life. I talk about this in my TEDx Talk and my book "The Gift of Adversity." In 2014, I'd been medically retired from the military and was now trying to regain my life. I was 230 pounds, fat, out of shape, and still unsure of what life held for me. Though I had overcome a tremendous amount, every day was a struggle. I still had a long way to go. In many ways, I was still embracing mediocrity, trapped in the victim mentality. I was embarrassed and struggled with depression, self-confidence, and income. Many people around me thought that because I'd already overcome so much that I had everything figured out. But I didn't. I was still scared to death that I'd never been able to become the person I truly wanted to be. Finally, one day I looked in the mirror and thought, 'When are you going stop making excuses and take charge of your life?!' Now in 2018, I'm 60 pounds lighter, at the peak of health, mentally bulletproof and driven with burning purpose! I've transformed my body, mindset, and habits to become a high achiever in every capacity! At 46 years old I'm in the best shape of my life". (2, 18) Another example is the story of Mrs. Andrea Parmar, an inspiring Psychiatric Nurse and the author of "Alone in a Crowd". In her book, she describes her story of recovery from a 16-year battle with bulimia and mental illness. She explains "With a life-changing shift in mindset, that took many years to accomplish....., I have learned how to take better care of myself. I was able to navigate my way through that dark tunnel to a healthier lifestyle. It took me about 2 years to "retrain" myself how to eat!". She highlights the notion of "shift your mindset", which she summarized in eight tips, "(1) avoid letting

a single event, somebody's actions, or a statement from others destroy or negatively overwhelm your mood; (2) try not to dwell on the past and stop asking the 'why me' questions, see your 'failures' as learning opportunities; (3) stop trying to please everyone else; (4) try not to assume failure or a negative outcome before you even begin, give yourself a realistic and optimistic chance to succeed; (5) try not to put undue pressure on yourself to be perfect, nobody is perfect so it is unfair to assume that you have to be perfect; (6) try not to make 'mountains out of molehills'; (7) resist the 'all or nothing' attitude, there is always a happy medium; and (8) stop trying so hard to cure yourself, you are not broken and you are not alone in this fight" (5, 16)

Hence, "mindfulness is the basic human ability to be fully present, aware of where we are and what we're doing, and not overly reactive or overwhelmed by what's going on around us". (9) Mindfulness is a way of living and part of adopting a healthy lifestyle. Like other goals, it requires a non-judgmental attitude, patience, time, and commitment. For people to practice mindfulness daily, they need to remember its goal, namely "to wake up to the inner workings of our mental, emotional, and physical processes" (9), as well as its many health benefits, which include helping to eradicate the current obesity epidemic. (6, 11) Mindfulness Day is celebrated globally on September 12th every year. People are encouraged to participate in a mindful challenge, attend meditation groups, watch mindfulness videos on a mindfulness facebook page, share ideas or comments on mindfulness

blogs, set up mindfulness meditation groups, or attend workshops to learn more about mindfulness and how to incorporate it in their daily lives. (1, 10, 12, 13)

Mindfulness Day "aims to raise awareness in the general population about the value and benefit mindfulness brings". (12) However, as healthcare professionals who have seen the benefits of mindfulness in patients with obesity and other cardiovascular disease risk factors, we believe it is not just a day but a lifestyle and therefore one should be reminded to be mindful on a daily basis. This new year is a perfect time to achieve a "new you" by starting to practice mindfulness every day. With time, you will see its positive health outcomes in your life. It's also a good time to always remember this famous quote "Your diet is not only what you eat. It's what you watch, what you listen to, what you read, the people you hang around...be mindful of the things you put into your body emotionally, spiritually, and physically".

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