

The Power of Meditation

Today is the seventh in a series of articles on mindfulness. If you would like to review any of the prior entries, you can find them on my website at www.drmcquaid.com. To review, mindfulness is a form of stress reduction. In the simplest terms, mindfulness is paying attention to the present moment without judgment. It focuses our attention on the only moment in which we are alive, which is right now. Paying attention in this way can reduce stress, depression, anxiety and even potentially bring about healing. Today I will explore meditation which is the heart and soul of mindfulness.

The first thing I would say about meditation is that it is not a religious practice. Meditation is a human practice. Meditation is a way to reconnect to our human spirit and in doing so, resolve negativity. It can promote a feeling of wholeness which can potentially lead to healing. The etymology of healing is whole, holy, and complete. An important distinction to make here is healing is different than curing. Bill Moyer, a news reporter on PBS said once, "Healing is possible even if a cure is not." What is meant by this is you can experience wholeness and healing even if you have cancer. You can feel whole even if you have no arms or legs. In meditation, we no longer identify with our body as who we are. We discover a greater connection with all of life.

When you meditate you initiate a process in the body called the relaxation response. The effects of the relaxation response include lowering: blood pressure, heart rate, breathing rate as well as lowering the hormone called cortisol, a stress hormone in the blood stream. Over time, there is a cumulative effect on the body that makes it more resilient to stressful events. You become "stress hardy", and better able to cope with life's vicissitudes.

The only attitude required to begin a meditation practice is willingness. There is a tendency for those new to meditation to put it off as something they want to do, but later when life offers the perfect opportunity. You will hear people say something like, "Oh, I will start meditating when I get on the beach in Hawaii or when I retire." Willingness is the attitude that says, "Today is a good time to start." It is wise to understand we don't need to wait for the perfect time. Right now is the only moment in which we are alive, the only moment to be willing. The importance of meditation is expressed in this quote by scientist and philosopher Blaise Pascal who said, "All of man's problems are due to the fact that he is unable to sit quietly alone in a room doing nothing." Since Pascal said this process can solve all of your problems, my challenge to you is to trust it.

The instructions for meditation are simple, and I will now guide you through your first experience. Please commit fifteen minutes to this exercise. Plan for time when you won't be interrupted. To begin, sit upright in a chair with your hand placed below your naval. Allow your feet to rest on the floor. Breathe in through your nose drawing air past your chest and into your belly. Feel the belly expand on the inhale and contract on the exhale. Follow your breath in and out trying as best as you can to focus only on the process of breathing. This will work for a couple of breath cycles and then a thought will come into your mind. This is normal. Don't get discouraged that the mind wanders off. The

instructions are very simple when this happens. When a thought enters your mind, you notice the thought, but you deliberately return your attention back to your breathing. Your breath thus becomes an anchor, a tool you can use to redirect the focus of your attention back to the present moment. We are not trying to control the mind. We are merely watching the mind, non-judgmentally.

Not judging the mind means it does not matter what the thoughts are that come up. We don't label any particular thought that arises as desirable or undesirable. It is just stuff coming up in the mind and it is spontaneous. Don't try to control it, let it happen. The only instruction you need is to notice your thought and be willing to come back to your breathing.

If you wonder off for five minutes about what is for dinner or you wish you had a different job, this is totally ok. Just notice you have been thinking and deliberately, on purpose, bring your attention back to your breathing. Say to yourself, "Here I am, breathing." Congratulations! You have just passed meditation 101. Your whole life will change by taking fifteen minutes everyday to sit and be with your breathing. It is an amazing realization to discover that your own breath can lead to self liberation. Interesting how it has been right under your nose the whole time.

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