

## Tilling the soil of mindfulness

Today is the eleventh in a series of articles on mindfulness. 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 some of the attitudes one can use to cultivate and deepen a mindfulness practice.

I often tell my patients that healing is a process and not an event. What I mean by this is healing of the body does not usually happen in an instant, but gradually over time. Healing the mind is the same; it is a process. We can support the process through greater understanding of positive attitudes. The cultivation of these attitudes is like tilling the soil of our mindfulness. Their development enriches our experience and understanding.

It is helpful to realize that mindfulness is not a technique per se; but rather a way of being in the present moment. It is wise to understand that mindfulness is of little value if practiced sporadically. It is best to incorporate these lessons everyday, whether your life is fabulous or you think your life is falling apart. If our lives today are good, bad, or indifferent, it is all ok. Right here and right now is a good place to begin.

The first attitude to consider is patience. Personally, this is a challenge for me. As a surgeon, my life at times is overly managed and competitive. In order to become a surgeon, one must strive and race toward high achievement. There is nothing wrong with this, but in the striving and goal seeking it is easy to develop impatience. Upon reflection, for most of my young adulthood in medical school and residency, I was always trying to get somewhere else. I thought I needed to reach a never ending series of goals. A race to nowhere is how I would describe it. Does this sound familiar to you? I was like a child with a butterfly's cocoon, trying to make the butterfly emerge sooner than it naturally would.

Only with mindfulness and maturity am I now aware that a butterfly will not break free from its cocoon until it is ready. An ancient Chinese proverb is, "Don't push on a river." This means you can't change the course of the flow of a river no matter what you try. With mindfulness we discover that the universe does not need our help. Whatever is unfolding in your life is doing so in its own time. Mindfulness gives us the chance to let mental strife and impatience subside. With mindfulness we can develop patience and take life one day at a time.

The next attitude is intentionality. We want to set the intention that the inner work of mindfulness is worth the effort. This quality sets the affirmation that life is important enough to take time everyday to be present. We are firm to commit some time everyday, but we are also flexible and not hard on ourselves if we miss a day. A wise expression for intentionality is, "You are responsible for the effort and not the result."

One of the characteristic features of mindfulness is that it is non-judgmental. Suspending judgment while being mindful can be viewed as another attitudinal quality we can develop. This may come as a shock, but you don't have to like mindfulness all of the time. Sometimes being mindful is stressful. It is a paradox, but like it or not, reducing stress can sometimes be stressful itself. We try as best as we can to not be judgmental of how we feel about the process. The value is in the process alone, and not how we feel about it.

Lastly, is the attitude of simplicity. We are in an age where cell phones, computers, fax machines, and blackberries are what we are dependent on. Everything is moving at the speed of light. We can feel so busy and preoccupied with technology that we lose sight of the simple things in life such as a sunset, birdsong, or the laughter of children. Simplifying your life nurtures the idea that less is more. On simplicity and mindfulness T.S. Eliot said, "A condition of complete simplicity costing not less than everything."

The mindfulness exercise for this week is to go for a mindful walk. Take a morning or evening walk slowly with your attention on every step you take. Notice the temperature of the air on your skin. Listen to the birdsong and watch the sun rise or set. Breathe in and breathe out and say something to yourself like, "Hear I am, waking and breathing." Nothing else has to happen. Just notice the simplicity of being alive.

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