

The Power of the Present Moment

The foundation for reducing stress is found in two actions. One is deep abdominal breathing. The other is called mindfulness. Being mindful can change your life because it draws your attention to the only moment in which you are alive, which is this present moment. Practicing mindfulness gives you the opportunity to “smell the roses.”

You may be asking, “What is mindfulness?” Mindfulness is non-judgmental moment to moment awareness. We make a decision to notice what is happening right now without placing a judgment on it. We try as best we can to just notice what is going on and not label it as good or bad, desirable or undesirable. This is not so easy to do because we are constantly judging our experiences.

Mindfulness asks us to let life be as it is without having an opinion on everything. Scientist and philosopher, Blaise Pascal, once said, “All of man’s problems are due to the fact that he is unable to sit quietly alone in a room, doing nothing.” Mindfulness practice can help us sit quietly alone and be with life as it unfolds. The rewards are enormous and will help solve problems if you give it a chance.

There are many ways to begin the process of mindfulness. My first suggestion is to eat with mindfulness. Try this exercise. Take a single raisin and eat it mindfully. Take a raisin and examine it. Look at the raisin as if you have never seen a raisin before. Look at its contours and colors. Now smell the raisin. Give it a squeeze and smell raisin. If your mind wanders, no problem, just bring it back to the raisin. Next, slowly put the raisin on your tongue and roll it slowly around in your mouth. See if you can taste it before you bite. Now slowly chew the raisin 20 times noticing what happens. Finally, swallow the raisin slowly feeling it descend in your throat.

Some of you reading right now are in judgment. What is McQuaid thinking asking me to eat a raisin? How can this help me? All judgments. Trust me and try this exercise once, suspend your judgment about why it may or may not be worthwhile. Don’t judge whether or not you like raisins. Just eat a single raisin mindfully and notice what happens. Chances are you will say you never really tasted a raisin before. Most people will say the raisin was an explosion of flavor unknown to them even though they have gulped down raisins in the past by the handful. So many of us want to loose weight, yet fail to realize that if we ate slowly, mindfully, we would not eat as much and the pounds would fall off.

Another exercise is to shower mindfully. The next shower you take, notice how your mind wonders while in the shower. I will notice that I will be in the shower, but my mind is already at work. I may be arguing on the phone at work in my imagination, but my body is in the shower at home. So I ask myself, “Where is my mind right now?” Wouldn’t it make more sense to be in the shower while I am in the shower? It makes no sense to be at work ahead of time, and in fact, it is stressful. To reduce my stress, I bring my mind back to the shower and pay attention. I feel the water, smell the soap, and am grateful for running water.

To substantiate these recommendations I will say all stress reduction programs use mindfulness as a foundation. I ate my first raisin in a class taught by a Harvard professor. There is great power in mindfulness and health benefits too. Mindfulness reduces stress, lowers blood pressure, promotes weight loss, and improves your attitude. When you are mindful, you can take lemons and make lemonade. T.S. Elliot wrote on mindfulness and said, "A condition of complete simplicity costing not less than everything." Pay attention to your life, so you don't miss it. It starts with a raisin.