

Being Mindful of Change: A Technique to Reduce Stress amid Change

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HIM professionals need more than tools to manage information, they need tools to help manage the stress and anxiety a state of constant change can bring. "Mindfulness" offers a way to reduce anxiety and keep focused.

During times of change, people may react with fear, anger, stress, panic, and anxiety.¹ HIM professionals know something about change and the feelings it causes-today they find themselves in a maelstrom of change: electronic health records, meaningful use, compliance initiatives, and ICD-10.

HIM professionals need more than tools to manage health information, they need tools that help them deal with stress and anxiety, maintain their balance, and sharpen their ability to stay focused on the tasks at hand. One such tool is called mindfulness.

Mindfulness and MBSR

Mindfulness arises when a person focuses attention deliberately in an accepting and nonjudging way to the experiences arising in the present moment, including the experiences in his or her inner life. Mindfulness is a basic human capacity for present-moment centered, nonjudging awareness.

And, very importantly, mindfulness is *not* more thinking about what is happening. Rather, it is an awareness that thinking is happening and an understanding of what the thoughts are.

Mindfulness has been cultivated in a variety of human cultures and contexts, especially in Buddhist traditions. Here in the West, perhaps the best known vehicle for developing and practicing mindfulness, regardless of the individual's cultural context or faith tradition, is Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR).

MBSR was developed by Jon Kabat-Zinn, a biologist, in 1979. Zinn held a strong belief that our negative thoughts can manifest themselves as unhealthy states in the body. In that same year, Zinn created the Stress Reduction Clinic at the University of Massachusetts Medical School in Worcester.

At the clinic, patients suffering from hypertension, heart disease, cancer, and diabetes are referred by their physicians to enroll in an eight-week program designed to help them cope with stress, pain, anxiety, and chronic illness.² At the heart of this program is the practice known as mindfulness meditation, which trains individuals to pay attention to the only moment that really matters: the present moment.

Research shows that MBSR is effective in reducing stress, anxiety, depression, and eczema, while strengthening the immune system.^{3,4,5,6,7} More importantly, research shows that due to the plasticity of the human brain, meditation practice can result in direct and lasting changes to the make-up of the brain, including the growth of neuronal connections, which can improve memory and awareness of self and compassion and increase activity of enzymes such as telomerase, which is important to the long-term health of cells.^{8,9,10}

The Interplay of Thoughts and Stress

Our mind and body are wired together to help us survive and manage threats. When a threat-or the perception of a threat-triggers an inner alarm, our minds and bodies go into the well-known stress reaction. Nerve and hormonal signals between the

nervous system and the other body systems prepare us to fight or flee from the threat.

An important element of stress reaction is the role of thoughts in activating, sustaining, or damping the reaction. In the workplace, for example, if a major change is announced, an individual automatically wonders, "Will this hurt me?" The thought cascades into other worries: "Will I lose my job? Will I have to learn new skills? Will I have to take a pay cut? How will I pay the mortgage?"

The problem with this line of thinking is that it is based on events that may happen in the future. The thoughts have nothing to do with the present moment. What is important for individuals to realize is that the thoughts are just thoughts. Consider the words Shakespeare gave to Hamlet: "Nothing is good or bad, only our thinking makes it so."

Staying in the present moment and cultivating an awareness of this interplay of thoughts, worries, and stress reactivity can help better manage the stress reaction by not fueling it so unconsciously with fears and worries.

The Attitudes of Mindfulness

By practicing mindfulness, individuals can change their relationship to stress and how they react to change. Seven attitudes form the practice foundation and intellectual framework for incorporating mindfulness into MBSR: nonjudging, patience, beginner's mind, trust, nonstriving, acceptance, and letting go.

Nonjudging

We can process every thought, emotion, feeling, or task that we encounter in a dualistic way: right or wrong, good or bad, yes or no. As humans, we are constantly judging events in terms of what they mean to us.

Judgments are like weapons we carry that distort and blind us to reality. It is only when, as psychologist Jack Kornfield points out, we become "mindful and aware in a nonjudgmental receptive fashion" that we comprehend the true nature of things.^{[11](#)}

By deliberately avoiding judgments, we support our ability to look more closely and not be hijacked by fear or other reactions. As a result, we can be more present, attentive, and responsive to the evolving situation, and an entirely different universe can arise from the one that judgments would have evoked.

The attitude of nonjudging does not mean never again making judgments or that doing so is some kind of mistake. Rather, practicing nonjudging can be as simple as mindfully recognizing when judging thoughts are present and not fighting or feeding them-in essence not "judging the judgments."

Patience

Persons who begin to practice mindfulness likely will notice that their minds are very discursive: filled with judgments, plans, and desires for life to be different. Soon their thoughts will turn to why mindfulness practice is not calming their discursive minds. This is where the attitude of patience comes into play.

Patience is a form of wisdom, according to Kabat-Zinn, informing us that events, both physical and mental, unfold in their own time.^{[12](#)}

The Tibetan mindfulness teacher Chogyam Trungpa provides a useful metaphor for the power of patience. Imagine anxiety, fear, or desire as an angry bull. Our first inclination is to lock the bull up in a pen, but in doing so the bull will cause more damage. If we let the bull roam in a meadow, it will eat grass, run, and eventually get tired and fall asleep.^{[13](#)}

Practicing mindfulness includes practicing patience at times. This can simply mean being willing to rest and remain with things just as they are, even if they are not pleasant or comfortable. Practicing patience is a willingness to let things be as they are, without trying to change or fix anything.

Beginner's Mind

Healthcare professionals are well trained and highly skilled. When faced with a problem or assignment, they bring their expertise to bear. However, expertise can get in the way, blinding a person to the reality in front of his or her eyes.

By being willing to see things freshly, we avoid the habit of tuning out anything familiar, and instead we take another, deeper look, as if we have never seen or experienced that person, phenomenon, or condition before.

The concert pianist Byron Janis describes how he was able to help a young pupil become a better pianist by recommending she take a different route home from school each night. Taking a new path opened the student to taking new pathways in her music. Within a month, according to Janis, the artist within the student began to emerge.¹⁴

Trust

Trusting oneself in practicing mindfulness means trusting that what one is noticing is authentic as an experience in this moment but that it is not something solid and permanent in itself.

This is a radically different view of one's usual perceptions. Practicing mindfulness calls on a person to realize and trust that he or she is capable of recognizing and holding inner experience in awareness, even when that experience is a firmly held belief, an insistent opinion, or an intense physical or emotional experience.

Nonstriving

Understandably, busy healthcare professionals are focused on "doing." Mindfulness focuses instead on "being." In fact, you could say that a person practicing mindfulness is practicing "being and not doing."

So much of human life is spent in doing that it is easy to forget that we are capable of simply being-being awake, alert, present, and aware of what is happening in the moment.

Nonstriving can mean that one notices the deep habit of doing, of intending to change or move or fix what is happening, and with this noticing is willing to let that striving impulse go without acting on it.

Thus mindfulness meditation is being willing to stop and notice with acceptance what is present.

Acceptance

For most human beings there is a natural tendency to look at life in terms of *I*-what *I* want to get out of something. However, on many occasions, life doesn't turn out the way we want it to. Being able to deal with what *is* instead of what we want is the essence of acceptance.

"Acceptance does not mean fatalism," writes author Deng Ming-Dao.¹⁵ It means being patient, becoming aware of what the present moment requires, and then doing what is best at that moment without leaving a mess.

Letting Go

The concept of letting go is best understood by the metaphor of a runner on a trail in the woods.

As the runner comes to a long stretch in the trail he notices that it has been washed over by a giant puddle. The runner thinks, "I could go around, but I will end up in the weeds and might get bitten by a tick and get Lyme disease." Or the runner might think, "I could run through the puddle, but I will ruin my shoes and get wet. I could jump over the puddle, but I might pull my groin." The runner decides to simply let go by running right through the puddle, adding emphasis with each step.

When we learn to let go, we let go of attachment to things we find both pleasant and unpleasant. We can let go of thinking things have to be a certain way. In a very real sense, when we learn to let go we become like Atlas realizing there is no need to hold the world on our shoulders. This can be very liberating.

Change Can Be for the Better

For Kabat-Zinn, to be truly mindful is to accept the fact that life contains both good and bad elements. This is what he calls full catastrophe living, where we can be present in life whether it is good, bad, or indifferent.¹⁶ By living mindfully we can find an inner balance that helps us to adapt to any situation.

Since change is a major part of life, adapting a mindful approach can help individuals come to the realization that when handled appropriately, change can be good.¹⁷ A measure of one's mindfulness occurs when they can appreciate the wisdom in the following phrase: if something good happens, good; if bad happens, good.¹⁸

An Invitation to Practice

Sitting meditation is the most common form of mindfulness practice. To start, most beginners use a straight back chair, assuming an upright position with the spine, neck, and head in comfortable alignment.

At the start of meditation, an individual's discursive mind will be filled with plans, worries, anxieties, and fears; therefore, the meditation practice acts as a lens focusing the individual's attention on one thing: the breath. To begin, breathe in naturally; if you like, focus on the stomach as it expands with the in-breath. Release the breath and notice the stomach contract.

Concentrating on breath is a way of practicing being aware, with the intent of deepening and steadying one's awareness, through the sensations of breathing as a primary focus. If your mind wanders, gently note what was on your mind and return to your breath. Don't worry, this is part of the practice.

As the discursive mind begins to settle, pay attention to the thoughts that arise, and as they arise see if you can hold them in awareness, just watch them float into consciousness, and then out of consciousness. Do not try to control your thoughts or judge them. Over time you will begin to notice that the thoughts will arise out of nowhere, and if you let them, they will disappear on their own accord.

The key is to stay with your thoughts, do not run from them, using the seven attitudes as your guide.

With MBSR, or any mindfulness practice, it is important to develop a formal daily practice, which includes up to 45 minutes of daily sitting. Practicing daily will help individuals develop deeper levels of awareness of self, others, and context.

Being mindful of others will include really hearing what they are saying and noticing-without judgment-how they are saying it and how they are acting. The noticing is simply noticing: being aware of what is unfolding.

One might also begin to notice another's reaction and have thoughts about it, but by bringing mindfulness to the situation each arising thought is more likely to come into awareness and less likely to hijack the situation.

The mindfulness of thoughts certainly includes mindfulness of one's own thoughts arising in reaction to the contact with the other person. These abilities only have the chance to manifest themselves with constant daily practice.

Mindfulness practice can be assimilated into many of our daily activities. For example, when writing an e-mail be aware of your thoughts. Before sending the e-mail, think about how someone will feel when they receive your message.¹⁹ In going to work, if you arrive and do not recall your trip there, you are not being mindful. If this happens, consider taking another route home and see what you learn.

Notes

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Additional Resources

Duke Integrative Medicine. www.dukeintegrativemedicine.org/index.php/2009012037/classes-workshops-events/mindfulness-based-stress-reduction.html.

University of California at Davis Center for Mind and Brain. <http://mindbrain.ucdavis.edu>.

University of Massachusetts Medical School's Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care, and Society (including information on other certified MBSR programs). www.umassmed.edu/cfm/home/index.aspx.

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