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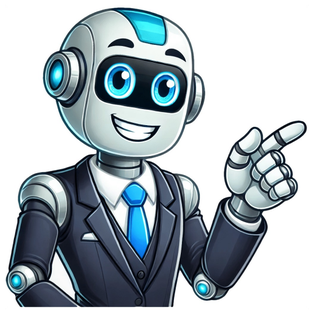

Scroll To Top Mindfulness means maintaining a moment-by-moment awareness of our thoughts, feelings, bodily sensations, and surrounding environment, through a gentle, nurturing lens. Mindfulness also involves acceptance, meaning that we pay attention to our thoughts and feelings without judging themwithout believing, for instance, that theres a right or wrong way to think or feel in a given moment. When we practice mindfulness, our thoughts tune into what were sensing in the present moment rather than rehashing the past or imagining the future. Though it has its roots in Buddhist meditation, a secular practice of mindfulness has entered the American mainstream in recent years, in part through the work of Jon Kabat-Zinn and his Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program, which he launched at the University of Massachusetts Medical School in 1979. Since that time, thousands of studies have documented the physical and mental health benefits of mindfulness in general and MBSR in particular, inspiring countless programs to adapt the MBSR model for schools, prisons, hospitals, veterans centers, and beyond. Studies have shown that practicing mindfulness, even for just a few weeks, can bring a variety of physical, psychological, and social benefits. Here are some of these benefits, which extend across many different settings.Mindfulness is good for our bodies: A seminal study found that, after just eight weeks of training, practicing mindfulness meditation boosts our immune systems ability to fight off illness. Practicing mindfulness may also improve sleep quality.Mindfulness is good for our minds: Several studies have found that mindfulness increases positive emotions while reducing negative emotions and stress. Indeed, at least one study suggests it may be as good as antidepressants in fighting depression and preventing relapse.Mindfulness changes our brains: Research has found that it increases density of gray matter in brain regions linked to learning, memory, emotion regulation, and empathy.Mindfulness helps us focus: Studies suggest that mindfulness helps us tune out distractions and improves our memory, attention skills, and decision-making.Mindfulness fosters compassion and altruism: Research suggests mindfulness training makes us more likely to help someone in need and increases activity in neural networks involved in understanding the suffering of others and regulating emotions. Evidence suggests it might boost self-compassion as well.Mindfulness enhances relationships: Research suggests mindfulness training makes couples more satisfied with their relationship, makes each partner feel more optimistic and relaxed, and makes them feel more accepting of and closer to one another. Mindful couples may also recover more quickly from conflict. Mindfulness affects the way we see ourselves: More mindful people have a stronger sense of self and seem to act more in line with their values. They may also have a healthier body image, more secure self-esteem, and more resilience to negative feedback.Mindfulness makes us more resilient: Some evidence suggests that mindfulness training could help veterans facing post-traumatic stress disorder, police officers, women who suffered child abuse, and caregivers.Mindfulness can help combat bias: Even a brief mindfulness training can reduce our implicit biases and the biased language we use. One way this works, researchers have found, is by attenuating the cognitive biases that contribute to prejudice.Mindfulness is good for business: Mindfulness training could help make leaders more confident, improve creativity, reduce multitasking, and improve client satisfaction.Mindfulness is good for parents and parents-to-be: Studies suggest it may reduce pregnancy-related anxiety, stress, and depression in expectant parents, and may even reduce the risk of premature births and developmental issues. Parents who practice mindful parenting report less stress, more positive parenting practices, and better relationships with their kids; their kids, in turn, are less susceptible to depression and anxiety, and have better social skills. Mindfulness training for families may lead to less-stressed parents who pay more attention to their kids.Mindfulness may be beneficial to teens: Practicing mindfulness can help teens reduce stress and depression and increase their self-compassion and happiness. Once teens arrive at college, it could also reduce their binge drinking.Mindfulness helps schools: Theres scientific evidence that teaching mindfulness in the classroom reduces behavior problems, aggression, and depression among students, and improves their happiness levels, self-regulation, and ability to pay attention. Teachers trained in mindfulness also show lower blood pressure, less negative emotion and symptoms of depression, less distress and urgency, greater compassion and empathy, and more effective teaching.Mindfulness helps health care professionals cope with stress, connect with their patients, and improve their general quality of life. It also helps mental health professionals by reducing negative emotions and anxiety, and increasing their positive emotions and feelings of self-compassion.Mindfulness helps prisons: Evidence suggests mindfulness reduces anger, hostility, and mood disturbances among prisoners by increasing their awareness of their thoughts and emotions, helping with their rehabilitation and reintegration.Mindfulness helps veterans: Studies suggest it can reduce the symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in the aftermath of war.Mindfulness fights obesity: Practicing mindful eating encourages healthier eating habits, helps people lose weight, and helps them savor the food they do eat. Pregnant women who practice mindful eating gain less weight during pregnancy, and have healthier babies. Jon Kabat-Zinn emphasizes that although mindfulness can be cultivated through formal meditation, thats not the only way. Its not really about sitting in the full lotus, like pretending youre a statue in a British museum, he says in this Greater Good video. Its about living your life as if it really mattered, moment by moment by moment by moment. Here are a few key components of practicing mindfulness that Kabat-Zinn and others identify:Pay close attention to your breathing, especially when youre feeling intense emotions.Noticereally noticewhat youre sensing in a given moment, the sights, sounds, and smells that ordinarily slip by without reaching your conscious awareness.Recognize that your thoughts and emotions are fleeting and do not define you, an insight that can free you from negative thought patterns.Tune into your bodys physical sensations, from the water hitting your skin in the shower to the way your body rests in your office chair.Find micro-moments of mindfulness throughout the day to reset your focus and sense of purpose. To develop these skills in everyday life, you can try these exercises used in Kabat-Zinns MBSR program and elsewhere: Mindful breathing, a common component of many forms of meditation that involves bringing attention to the physical sensations of the breath as it flows in and out. Body scan, another common practice where you bring attention to different parts of your body in turn, from head to toe. The raisin exercise, where you slowly use all of your senses, one after another, to observe a raisin in great detail, from the way it feels in your hand to the way its taste bursts on your tongue. This exercise is intended to help you focus on the present moment, and can be tried with different foods. Walking meditation, where you focus on the movement of your body as you take step after step, your feet touching and leaving the groundan everyday activity we usually take for granted. This exercise is often practiced walking back and forth along a path 10 paces long, though it can be practiced along most any path. Loving-kindness meditation, which the GGSCs Christine Carter explains in this post, involves extending feelings of compassion toward people, starting with yourself then branching out to someone close to you, then to an acquaintance, then to someone giving you a hard time, then finally to all beings everywhere. When trying out these exercises, remember that different types of mindfulness practices have different benefits. It might take some experimentation to find the practice thats right for you. If youre interested in more formal training, here are some successful programs for cultivating mindfulness that weve identified..Jon Kabat-Zinns Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction Program (MBSR), in which students meet for two-to-three hours per week for eight weeks, practicing at home between classes; it has helped tens of thousands of people build mindfulness.Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) adapts the MBSR model specifically for people suffering from depression and chronic unhappiness. Developed by Zindel Segal, Mark Williams, and John Teasdale, MBCT combines mindfulness practices with practices from cognitive therapy, and it has been backed up by a great deal of research.Megan Cowan, founder of the Mindful Schools program, offers tips for teaching mindfulness to kids in this Greater Good article. Dr. Karen Bluth shares her experiences and tips for teaching mindfulness to at-risk teens, and Patrick Cook-Deegan has eight tips for teaching mindfulness in high school.In another Greater Good article, Margaret Cullen, founder of the SMART-in-Education program, explains how she uses mindfulness to help teachers take care of themselves and keep from burning out.Programs like the Search Inside Yourself Leadership Institute and eMindful are bringing mindfulness and emotional intelligence training to workplaces. Read Golbie Kamareis five tips for launching a meditation program at work.Nancy Bardackes Mindfulness-Based Childbirth and Parenting (MBCP) program offers mindfulness training to expectant parents; her book Mindful Birthing describes her program and also offers detailed instructions for cultivating mindfulness in everyday life. For more: Watch our videos of Kabat-Zinn for his take on how to build mindfulness and check out these Six Mindfulness Exercises You Can Try Today from Pocket Mindfulness. Social disconnection, isolation, and stress are key contributors to the loneliness epidemic and mental health crisis impacting young people on college campuses today. These issues affect people of all generations in the United States and across the globe. Feeling connected and accepted by others is a fundamental human need. In education, belonging and connection are critical factors in student success, engagement, and retention both face to face and online, on college campuses and within K12 learning communities. In K12 settings, both student-teacher and peer-to-peer connections are key factors in school attendance and in preventing unhealthy risk-taking behaviors and physical and mental health problems among students. Given how essential social connections are to student well-being and success, the CDC recommends educators devote more time to giving students the opportunity to develop and practice their social skills. To do this, educators need simple and effective ways to promote and facilitate positive connections. One promising way to do that is with relational mindfulness practices, which combine socializing with stress reduction, helping students learn basic mindfulness skills and connect with themselves and each other more deeply. Developed at UCLA Mindful, where one of us (Natalie) trained as a mindfulness teacher, relational mindfulness practices provide a structured, fun, and engaging way to initiate engagement between students and promote connection, compassion, and belonging. The benefits of relational mindfulness practices Mindful awareness results from placing attention on present-moment experiences with openness and curiosity. Relational mindfulness involves extending that awareness on to the experience of interacting with another person. This awareness can focus on any social interaction in daily life and can also be cultivated in structured, formal practices. These practices are suited to the needs of beginning and experienced mindfulness practitioners alike, and well discuss some specific practices below. Beyond fostering peer connections, relational mindfulness offers additional benefits. Its an accessible way to develop basic mindfulness skills, including awareness and meta-awareness (awareness of multiple things simultaneously). This can help students feel less consumed by their experiences, like being lost in negative thoughts or overloaded by difficult emotions. Focusing attention on another person, rather than inward (e.g., on breathing), can make mindfulness more engaging for young people. Part of the practice of relational mindfulness involves listening and speaking to others with greater attention, building both mindfulness and social skills. Students learn how to pay attention to someones emotional state and build empathy from listening to their perspective. Listening to another persons experienceespecially one that feels relatablecan broaden their perspective as they reflect and perhaps start to understand themselves better. In this way, feelings and experiences can become more human and normalized. And research suggests that incorporating emotions into learningallowing students to think and feel not just for themselves but for and with others toostrongly predicts healthy brain development in adolescents in the short and long term. Relational mindfulness practices often help students feel more comfortable being themselves. In part, this is because there is no two-way, back-and-forth conversation. One partner silently listens to another without responding. This no comment rule allows partners to silently witness one anothers experience. For many, having a peer as a silent witness can feel akin to acceptance and permission to not just authentically be themselves, but also explore and learn about themselves more deeply. For the listener, silently witnessing anothers experience is an opportunity to develop more empathy and compassion. Relational mindfulness practices work well both in person and online for a variety of ages and needs. While relational mindfulness is often practiced in person, it is equally impactful in online learning environments. Digital spaces have unique challengesstudents may feel disconnected, distracted, or hesitant to engage. Relational mindfulness practices may help bridge that gap, creating meaningful interactions in any setting. For Lucy, 19, who participated in a 14-week stress reduction and social connection program at Arizona State University, relational mindfulness practices connected her both to peers and to herself, which made her feel good. She remarked on how she often came to the sessions feeling stressed and wondering if she truly had time to attend, given homework and other commitments. Yet each time she left the sessions feeling refreshed, revived, and happier. For her as a college freshman, experiencing meaningful connection and acceptance with the upperclassmen in the program buoyed her self-confidence and inner strength. Lucy is not alone in her positive experience with relational mindfulness. The ReSource Project, one of the largest mindfulness studies to date, included relational mindfulness practices and found that they fostered peoples social connectedness and reduced their feelings of isolation. Lead researcher Tania Singer characterized relational mindfulness as a form of social glue, helping participants stay actively engaged over nine months of practice. People reported enjoying partner mindfulness exercises, feeling better after doing them, experiencing close connection with their partner (who changed weekly), and feeling more connected with the universal human experience. Different ways to practice relational mindfulness We took steps to systematically identify and understand the full range of relational mindfulness practices developed and taught at UCLA Mindful by Diana Winston and Marvin Belzer, and we cover some of the practices below. These can be brought into online and face-to-face learning environments by educators and mental health practitioners. Check-ins: Check-ins can be done daily in small groups at the beginning of class, with each member of the group taking two minutes to share how they are feeling and reflecting on where they are in regard to the current lesson, noting what is clear and what they could better understand. Group check-ins can help students feel more engaged, understand each others experiences, self-reflect, and normalize challenges. After check-ins, groups may share with the whole class any themes that came upfor example, We are all feeling pretty stressed and ready for break. We also had some confusion about the upcoming project that is due. Thunder and lightning rounds: These teacher-led practices quickly sweep around the entire classroom. The teacher calls on each student to answer one question that may be focused on learning or building relationships. Thunder rounds focus on questions that can be answered in a few words, such as What is your biggest takeaway from this unit? or What are you most looking forward to doing this weekend? A lightning round focuses on a question that can be answered in just one word, such as What word would you use to describe Martin Luther King? or If you were any kind of animal, what would you be? This can help build connections or advance learning. Each member of the classroom has a low-stakes opportunity to participate, which can help students who have difficulty engaging in discussions feel more comfortable. Appreciative inquiry: In groups of two to four, students take turns speaking for two minutes about something that is going well, something that they are grateful for, or a big or small victory they have experienced recently. This helps to reinforce positive circumstances or experiences, and students often find it uplifting to discuss and hear good things. Monologues: In pairs or groups of three, students take turns answering a question for two minuteslike What brings you joy?and silently listening to one anothers answers. Students can learn about each other, reflect on what makes them happy and how this might relate to their classmates happiness, and focus on positive aspects of their own lives. Repeating questions: In pairs, students take turns asking a repeating question focused on, for example, the positive character traits of someone they know or a current or historical figure who is the subject of their learning. The listener asks: What do you like (or admire) about them? The speaker answers the question fully. The listener says thank you and then asks the question again. This process continues until two minutes are up and the listener and the speaker switch roles. Students have the opportunity to delve deeper into a topic, and the questions can be tailored to focus on important themes like kindness or compassion. Several of these exercises can be easily adapted for online classrooms. Check-ins, monologues, repeating questions, and looping inquiry can all be done in breakout rooms, using the timer feature to keep track of time, posting the instructions in the chat for students to refer back to. Some students find these online formats even more comfortable than in-person interactions, as the digital setting can provide a sense of structure and safety that allows for greater openness. Mental health practitioners may find these exercises beneficial to fostering cohesion in therapeutic or social skills groups. They may be able to work on a deeper level and explore other questions. Looping inquiry, for example, involves partners taking turns back and forth asking and answering the same question, such as Whats holding you back from (making a good choice)? for three minutes, with one partner thanking the other after completing their response before switching roles. After time is up, partners switch the looping question to In what way are you ready to (make a good choice?), saying thank you once their partner has finished responding and then switching speaker and listener roles for three minutes. Afterward, student pairs can process the activity together and then with the group, reflecting on similar and different experiences. Students can also be encouraged to engage in mindfulness out loud by narrating their internal experiences. For example: As Im talking about what makes me happy, Im noticing that my stomach is fluttering. It feels exciting to share this and maybe a little sad, too. One of my big sources of joy is my grandmother. I dont get to see her that often. This helps to further mindfulness skills by naming what is in the students awareness, also helping other students understand how their classmate is feeling and reflecting on their own experience, understanding they are not alone in their difficulties. The key with all of these exercises is that they are facilitated in a light and positive way. If students are uncomfortable and do not wish to participate, they can journal their responses to the questions separately. For their own enjoyment and embodied learning, we suggest educators try out these practices first. These are intended as learning, reflection, and connection exercises that leverage positivity, promoting understanding and respect for oneself and others. Whether practiced in person or online, relational mindfulness leverages the deeply human experience that is within the essence of all learning. The need for connection, presence, and reflection transcends physical space. Education, at its best, prepares learners for the journey of life and includes both heart and mind. By intentionally fostering relational mindfulness in both digital and in-person classrooms, educators can create environments where students feel truly seen, supported, and engagedno matter where they are. When you think of mindfulness, what comes to mind? Perhaps a quiet meditation session, several deep breaths, and a moment of calm amid the hustle and bustle of daily life. Much of what we recognize as mainstream mindfulness has been shaped through a Western lens, often stripped of its cultural and relational dimensions. The same goes for many of the mindfulness-based programs that are studied in Western psychological research, such as mindfulness-based stress reduction and mindfulness-based cognitive therapy. But what if mindfulness were something moresomething deeply rooted in land, ancestry, and the wisdom of generations? For many Indigenous communities, mindfulness is not just about individual well-being; it is about connectionto Country, to land, to community, and to the natural rhythms that have guided their ways of knowing for thousands of years. First Nations peoples view cultural and spiritual traditions as integral to the holistic healing process and emphasize the importance of connections to family, community, and land in their everyday life. Many mindfulness-based programs share similarities with First Nations spiritual practices that focus on harmony and unity with the natural and spiritual realms. As just one example, Dadirri (da-did-ee, an Aboriginal word meaning deep listening) is a practice of quiet still awareness by Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann, who is a proud Ngangiwumirriwoman and Elder fromNauiyuin the Daly River region of the Northern Territory in Australia. Derived from the Ngangikurunggurr and Ngengiwumirri languages of the Aboriginal peoples of the Daly River region, this practice involves listening to the deep water soundsthe meaning of Ngangikurunggurr. As Ungunmerr-Baumann explains, she often sits by the riverbank or walks among the trees to practice Dadirri, connecting to the deep spring of stillness that flows inside her. One of us (Wendy) and colleagues conducted a review of what the research says on adapting mindfulnessbased activities and programs for First Nations peoples. We explored what it means for teachers and practitioners to move beyond white mindfulnessto reclaim mindfulness as a practice of healing, connection, and cultural renewaland what we can learn when mindfulness is not about escaping the world but about returning to it through land, wisdom, and tradition. Mindfulness for Indigenous communities We analyzed the data from 10 reports of nine studies, with a combined 125 participants. We found that participants taking part in mindfulness-based programs that were adapted to align with Indigenous culture reduced their symptoms of anxiety, depression, distress, and stress. They also reported improvements in their quality of life, health, and self-regulation. After the programs, participants found that they were able to engage more with the present moment and mind-wander less. Drawing on our reviews findings, we propose several insights that can be useful to mindfulness educators and practitioners who would like to adapt mindfulness-based programs and activities for First Nations peoples, centering First Nations values and wisdom. These insights are drawn from the Indigenous perspectives embedded in the studies we reviewed, which have contributed to the success of mindfulness-based programs delivered to First Nations peoples. At the core of these practices are Indigenous wisdom, spirituality, traditions, values, and knowledge. To integrate these cultural elements, you should co-design programs and activities with Indigenous Elders, instructors and participants, and mindfulness practitioners. With that in mind, here are four important elements to incorporate in a meaningful program: 1. Engage a culturally adaptive mindfulness instructor. The mindfulness instructor can be an Indigenous mindfulness instructor with training in mindfulness-based practices or someone who is not Indigenous but has received Indigenous mindfulness training and who actively practices mindfulness centering Indigenous wisdom and knowledge. For example, teachers can receive Indigenous mindfulness training through institutions such as Wayapa and the Mariam Rose Foundation for Dadirri. Through Wayapa training, for example, one of us (Wendy) has been actively involved in Earth-based connection practices centering ancient ways of knowing, being, and doing. Wendy learned to live in harmony with the environment and take mindful action to care for the planet. While traditional mindfulness practices often focus on internal awareness and individual well-being, Wayapa reconnected her to the Earth as a living, relational presence. As such, mindfulness is not only about observing thoughts or slowing down the mind, but also about remembering our responsibility to care for Country. What felt especially meaningful for Wendy was the emphasis on interconnectionbetween self, land, ancestors, and future generations. Through Wayapa practice, Wendy came to see that healing is collective, embodied, and rooted in naturenot something separate from it. 2. Modify standard meditation practices. We suggest that the practices from standardized mindfulness-based programs be retained, including mindful eating, body scan, focused-attention meditation, sitting meditation, movement meditation (standing and lying-down yoga), walking meditation, mountain/lake meditation, and loving-kindness meditation. However, the instructions for these meditations should reflect our deep connections to the land, seasons, and cycles of the Earth. This could include terminologies and metaphors that are reflective of Indigenous culture and the holistic health perspective (e.g., the seven domains of the social and emotional well-being framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia) and the Indigenous worldview of connection to land and spirituality. For example, this meditation of honoring Indigenous land offers a modified opening of loving-kindness meditation, which guides people as follows:This guided meditation is about showing gratitude, respect, and honor for Indigenous land and the Indigenous humans who have been here, caring for it, all along. If you are indigenous to the land you are on, it will be a time to connect with your ancestors. The land we are on is integral to our happiness and existence. But it was inhabited by Indigenous humans firstwithout them, the land would not be what it is now. Lets take a moment to honor both. 3. Incorporate Indigenous knowledge into practice reflections. When asking participants what they notice during or after their meditations, the themes for questions can be derived from Indigenous wisdom, spirituality, traditions, values, and knowledge; ideally, metaphors, poems, quotes, and phrases are delivered in local Indigenous languages. For example, the metaphors include hau (breath of spirit), mauri (life principle), aloha and mahalo (love, peace, and compassion), creation stories, traditional prayers, personas in traditional Indigenous stories, and different nations beliefs and stories about all the elements. The following Hawaiian Aloha meditation is an example of incorporating Indigenous knowledge into reflections:Aloha. Please find a comfortable seated position. Focus on your breath, breathe in, breathe out. Breathe in, breathe out. As you continue your calming breath, feel your body relax into your seated position. There are many amazing Hawaiian words that possess powerful energies. In this meditation, we are focusing on Hooponopono. The beauty of Hooponopono is that it offers the benefits of cleansing and healing. It is a beautiful and righteous tool. Roughly, translated into English, it is: I love you. I am sorry. Please forgive me. Thank you. In this meditation, you are focusing on reality, the seen and the unseen, using the English translation of Hooponopono. Bring your awareness to your physical reality. This is the reality that is brought into solid form, by your five sensesseeing, tasting, smelling, hearing, and touching. 4. Allow space for ritual and prayer. Mindfulness programs can start with a land acknowledgement, ritual, or prayer, and each class can end with a prayer. These rituals are Indigenous ways of being to create a sacred space of honoring the teaching of mindfulness. These rituals and prayers should only be offered by a practitioner of that culture. The studies we reviewed included traditional ceremony elements such as smoking ceremonies in Aboriginal custom, Gani Buurrgi-gu (a tie-to-body meditation) in Hawaiian culture, smudging in Inuit and Mtis communities, and karakia (prayers) in Maori culture. As the training manager of Wayapa Wuurrk, one of us (Jem) advocates connection with the Earth while practicing mindfulness. Wayapa is an Earth-connection mindfulness practice that is based on ancient Indigenous wisdom that focuses on taking care of the Earth as the starting point for creating Earth Mind Body Spirit well-being. The Wayapa Wuurrk framework becomes the conduit for all people to reconnect to the Earth through 14 elements, and to their own ancestry and culture by observing the natural world, adding their own personal stories of the elements, and adding their own cultural layers and stories. For example, during Wendys Wayapa training, she was introduced to the Moon element, a symbol of reflection, rhythm, and cyclical renewal. As she explored its meaning, Wendy found herself unexpectedly transported back to her childhood in China, where the Moon held deep cultural significance during the Moon Festival. She recalled the fond memories of sharing mooncakes with her family under the full-moon sky, a tradition that symbolizes reunion, harmony, and connection across time and space. In that moment, Wayapa didnt just teach Wendy about Indigenous connection to the Moon, but also helped her reconnect with her own cultural roots. This experience reminded her that mindfulness, when practiced through an inclusive and culturally grounded lens, can awaken powerful memories and honor the many layers of identity we carry. Scroll To Top By Science of Happiness Podcast | July 24, 2025 Cultivate more joy in your life with this practice led by meditation teacher and author Spring Washam. 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While these statistics are alarming, there is some good news: Mounting research points to the promise of mindfulnesspaying attention to your present thoughts, feelings, and sensations without judging themin helping people alleviate depression. Studies have suggested that mindfulness-based cognitive therapy is just as effective as medication in preventing depression relapse among adults with a history of recurrent depression, and in reducing depressive symptoms among those with active depression. In his new book When Antidepressants Arent Enough: Harnessing the Power of Mindfulness to Alleviate Depression, Stuart Eisendrath, former director of the UCSF Depression Center, explores how people can use mindfulness to develop a healthier relationship with their depression. The goal, he writes, is not to get rid of depression completelyas this may be unlikely for many peoplebut to accept it and detach from it enough to live a happier, healthier life. Eisendrath reminds us that we dont have to be completely free of depression to accomplish our goals. His book provides not only hope for people suffering depression, but also practical tools. Here are a few of them. Distance yourself from depressive thoughts Eisendrath emphasizes that depression-fueled thoughts are just thoughts and not facts. Leaning into them often triggers negative thought spirals, where you keep replaying the same thoughts over and over in your head. However, learning to distance yourself from these self-critical or catastrophizing thoughts through mindfulness can help you choose to react differently the next time they bubble up. One exercise he recommends is what he calls thought detachment, where you imagine your thoughts are drifting clouds or leaves floating by and then practice not engaging them or becoming attached to them. Practices like this can strengthen your observing self, a stance where you engage with emotionally charged thoughts in a less reactive way. For example, instead of thinking, I am worthless, you may reframe it as I am having a thought that I am worthless. Creating this bit of distance from your thoughts may help soften their potency and help you let go of judgment, criticism, and ruminations about the past. Accept depressive feelings and thoughts Instead of actively avoiding or resisting depression and depressive thoughts, which may worsen symptoms, Eisendrath recommends trying to accept them. Acceptance does not mean being resigned or giving upit means acknowledging and embracing what feelings or thoughts are present, and letting go of the desire to change what happened in the past. Research suggests that practicing acceptance can help improve your symptoms of depression, quality of life, and ability to function. To help with acceptance, Eisendrath suggests the RAIN technique:Recognize when a strong or upsetting emotion is present.Accept the emotion non-judgmentally.Investigate the feelings, thoughts, and sensations you are experiencing. Think about how you might react to them, if at all.Nonidentify with your emotions and shift to your observing self. Focus on the present Rumination about past failures and catastrophizing about the future take up a lot of mental space in depression. Eisendrath recommends mindfulness practices that can help you focus on the present, break your attention away from these thought spirals, and, over time, change these tendencies. Present moment awareness:Sit upright and comfortably, closing your eyes or allowing your gaze to fall down. Notice the sensations throughout your body.Shift your attention to your breath.After a few minutes, shift your attention to the sounds around you.After a few minutes, shift your attention to your thoughts. Notice them arise, then drift away. Counting breaths:Focus on your breath moving in and out of your nostrils, for a few minutes. Then, begin counting each inhalation.Start from zero and go up to ten, then go back down to zero. Repeat.If you notice your mind wandering, shift your attention back to your breathing and start from zero again. You can try this exercise for 5-10 minutes or as long as you are comfortable. Self-compassion Self-compassion helps you practice self-kindness, recognize your common humanity with others (vs. feeling isolated and ashamed), and not overidentify with your perceived faults. It can also help you manage your inner critic and lessen its impactall of which may buffer against depressive symptoms. Eisendrath recommends several practices. Loving-kindness meditation: There are different variations of this practice, but Eisendrath suggests that you start by sitting comfortably in a quiet place, noticing your breath. Placing your hand to your heart, repeat the following with each breath:May I be safeMay I be healthyMay I be happyMay I live with easeIf you are not comfortable directing these phrases at yourself, you may direct them toward somebody else (e.g. a loved one, a pet, or an infant). Common humanity: Throughout your day, observe other people with whom you cross paths. Bring your attention to a stranger, and practice saying to yourself:Just like me, they want to be happy.Just like me, they make mistakes and suffer, too.Just like me, they are doing their best in the world While Eisendrath encourages people to try self-compassion when managing depression, he also reminds them to be self-compassionate when practicing mindfulness. Often when people first begin practicing mindfulness, they feel like theyre failing; their minds may wander and be easily distracted. However, mind wandering is a common, natural part of mindfulness practice and happens even to the most advanced practitioners; it is not a sign of failure. Mindfulness is a skill to be honed over time, at your own pace. While mindfulness alone does not replace other types of therapy for depression, it can help people in conjunction with or after other treatments, Eisendrath suggests, providing lifelong tools for taking control of depression. If you are suffering from depressionor even if youre just someone wanting to be happier in lifeit might help to pick up Eisendraths book and try out some of these practices yourself. According to thousands of years of tradition, Buddhists meditate to understand themselves and their connections to all beings. By doing so, they hope to be released from suffering and ultimately gain enlightenment. In recent decades, researchers have been gaining insight into the benefits of practicing this ancient tradition. By studying more secular versions of mindfulness meditation, theyve found that learning to pay attention to our current experiences and accept them without judgment might indeed help us to be happier. Studies to date suggest that mindfulness affects many aspects of our psychological well-beingimproving our mood, increasing positive emotions, and decreasing our anxiety, emotional reactivity, and job burnout. But does mindfulness affect our bodies as well as our minds? Recently, researchers have been exploring this questionwith some surprising results. While much of the early research on mindfulness relied on pilot studies with biased measures or limited groups of participants, more recent studies have been using less-biased physiological markers and randomly controlled experiments to get at the answer. Taken together, the studies suggest that mindfulness may impact our hearts, brains, immune systems, and more. Though nothing suggests mindfulness is a standalone treatment for disease nor the most important ingredient for a healthy life, here are some of the ways that it appears to benefit us physically. Mindfulness is good for our hearts Heart disease is the leading killer in the United States, accounting for about 1 in 4 deaths every year. So, whatever decreases the risks or symptoms of heart disease would significantly impact societys health. Mindfulness may help with that. In one study, people with pre-hypertension were randomly assigned to augment their drug treatment with either a course in mindfulness meditation or a program that taught progressive muscle relaxation. Those who learned mindfulness had significantly greater reductions in their systolic and diastolic blood pressure than those who learned progressive muscle relaxation, suggesting that mindfulness could help people at risk for heart disease by bringing blood pressure down. In another study, people with heart disease were randomly assigned to either an online program to help them practice meditation or to a waitlist for the program while undergoing normal treatment for heart disease. Those who took the mindfulness program showed significant improvements on the six-minute walking test (a measure of cardiovascular capacity) and slower heart rates than those in the waitlist group. While one review of randomly controlled studies showed that mindfulness may have mixed effects on the physical symptoms of heart disease, a more recent review published by the American Heart Association concluded that, while research remains preliminary, there is enough evidence to suggest mindfulness as an adjunct treatment for coronary disease and its prevention. Mindfulness may also be good for hearts that are already relatively healthy. Research suggests that meditating can increase respiratory sinus arrhythmia, the natural variations in heart rate that happen when we breathe that indicate better heart health and an increased chance of surviving a heart attack. Mindfulness may decrease cognitive decline from aging or Alzheimers People tend to lose some of their cognitive flexibility and short-term memory as they age. But mindfulness may be able to slow cognitive decline, even in people with Alzheimers disease. In a 2016 study, people with Alzheimers disease engaged in either mindfulness meditation, cognitive stimulation therapy, relaxation training, or no treatment, and were given cognitive tests over two years. While cognitive stimulation and relaxation training seemed to be somewhat beneficial in comparison to no treatment, the mindfulness training group had much more robust improvements on cognitive scores than any other group. Why might that be true? A 2017 study looking at brain function in healthy, older adults suggests meditation may increase attention. In this study, people 55 to 75 years old spent eight weeks practicing either focused breathing meditation or a control activity. Then, they were given the Stroop testa test that measures attention and emotional controlwhile having their brains monitored by electroencephalography. Those undergoing breath training had significantly better attention on the Stroop test and more activation in an area of the brain associated with attention than those in the active control group. While this research is preliminary, a systematic review of research to date suggests that mindfulness may mitigate cognitive decline, perhaps due to its effects on memory, attention, processing, and executive functioning. Mindfulness may improve your immune response When we encounter viruses and other disease-causing organisms, our bodies send out troops of immune cells that circulate in the blood. These cells, including pro- and anti-inflammatory proteins, neutrophils, T-cells, immunoglobulins, and natural killer cells, help us to fight disease and infection in various ways. Mindfulness, it turns out, may affect these disease-fighting cells. In several studies, mindfulness meditation appeared to increase levels of T-cells or T-cell activity in patients with HIV or breast cancer. This suggests that mindfulness could play a role in fighting cancer and other diseases that call upon immune cells. Indeed, in people suffering from cancer, mindfulness appears to improve a variety of biomarkers that might indicate progression of the disease. In another study, elderly participants were randomly assigned to an eight-week Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) course or a moderate-intensity exercise program. At the end, participants whod practiced mindfulness had higher levels of the protein interleukin-8 in their nasal secretions, suggesting improved immune function. Another study found increases in interleukin-10 in colitis patients who took a mindfulness meditation course compared to a mind-body educational program, especially among patients whose colitis had flared up. Yet another study found that patients who had greater increases in mindfulness after an MBSR course also showed faster wound healing, a process regulated by the immune system. Studies have found effects on markers of inflammation, toolike C-reactive protein, which in higher levels can harm physical health. Research shows that people with rheumatoid arthritis have reduced C-reactive protein levels after taking an MBSR course versus being on a waitlist for the course. Overall, these findings suggest that mindfulness meditation can have disease-fighting powers through our immune response. Mindfulness may reduce cell aging Cell aging occurs naturally as cells repeatedly divide over the lifespan and can also be increased by disease or stress. Proteins called telomeres, which are found at the end of chromosomes and serve to protect them from aging, seem to be impacted by mindfulness meditation. Studies suggest that long-time meditators may have greater telomere lengths. In one experimental study, researchers found that breast cancer survivors who went through MBSR preserved the length of their telomeres better than those who were on a waitlist. However, this study also found that general supportive therapies impacted telomere length; so, there may not be something special about MBSR that impacts cell aging. On the other hand, another study with breast cancer survivors found no differences in telomere length after taking an MBSR course; but they did find differences in telomere activity, which is also related to cell aging. In fact, a 2018 review of research ties mindfulness training to increased telomere activity, suggesting it indirectly affects the integrity of the telomeres in our cells. Perhaps thats why scientists are at least optimistic about the positive effects of meditation on aging. Mindfulness may help reduce psychological pain Of course, while the above physiological benefits of mindfulness are compelling, we neednt forget that mindfulness also impacts our psychological well-being, which, in turn, affects physical health. In fact, its quite likely that these changes have synergistic effects on one another. First of all, a great deal of research suggests that mindfulness can help healthy people reduce their stress. And thanks to Jon-Kabat Zinns pioneering MBSR program, theres now a large body of research showing that mindfulness can help people cope with the pain, anxiety, depression, and stress that might accompany illness, especially chronic conditions. For example, drug addictions, at heart, come about because of physiological cravings for a substance that relieves people temporarily from their psychological suffering. Mindfulness can be a useful adjunct to addiction treatment by helping people better understand and tolerate their cravings, potentially helping them to avoid relapse after theyve been safely weaned off of drugs or alcohol. The same is true for people struggling with overeating. Fascinating though it is, we shouldnt overplay meditations effects on physical health at the expense of its importance to emotional health. In fact, it may be difficult to separate out the two, as a key impact of mindfulness is stress reduction, and psychological stress has been tied to heart health, immune response, and telomere length. This idea is further supported by the fact that other stress-reducing therapies also seem to impact physical health, as well. Still, its encouraging to know that something that can be taught and practiced can have an impact on our overall healthnot just mental but also physicalmore than 2,000 years after it was developed. Thats reason enough to give mindfulness meditation a try. A version of this article was originally published in Lions Roar.

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