



How Mindfulness Can Ease the Symptoms of Chronic Illness

The term mindfulness has become ubiquitous in recent years, but it holds promise for those living with chronic illnesses.

By Dana Henry

SINGER/SONGWRITER Julianna Raye discovered mindfulness after her 1990s record deal with Warner Bros. Records ended and she experienced depression. Her therapist encouraged her to try meditation. She says she was just desperate enough to give it a shot. She went into it with no expectations, an attitude that served her well.¹ To her surprise, meditating worked. Slowly. “Two years later, I was still doing it,” she says. That’s when she knew she was onto something. She says she felt more grounded and experienced positive physical changes.

Since then, Raye has become a mindfulness meditation trainer and has helped many clients deal with their own debilitating

health issues, including chronic illnesses, through mindfulness. Her own mindfulness work proved that her body and mind were far more resilient than she had been giving them credit for. As a trainer, she knows that same realization is important for anyone facing a chronic illness.

For those living with chronic conditions, Raye says mindfulness is ultimately about learning how to use their illness to deepen who they are as human beings and, ultimately, to experience more fulfillment and well-being. “You can, over time, rewrite yourself,” she says. “You can have a new permanent baseline of well-being and tranquility and energy.”

What Is Mindfulness?

Mindfulness, simply put, means keeping one's attention trained on the present.² It may seem like people do that naturally, but more often than we realize, our minds skitter away from the present and instead replay the past or anticipate the future. That can happen even while carrying out physical tasks in the here and now, such as driving, doing chores or performing routine duties at work. This split between acting in the present and thinking in the past or future can lead to disharmony, especially when chronic illness is involved. It's easy to ruminate on negative health issues or worry about what the future may hold in terms of prognosis or treatment.

One of the most-common forms of mindfulness is mindfulness meditation, which has its origins in ancient Eastern religion and philosophy.³ In the West, this form of meditation is used to address symptoms associated with issues such as anxiety and depression.⁴ Meditation has also been shown to reduce chronic pain by 57 percent, with accomplished meditators achieving pain-reduction rates of more than 90 percent. Mindfulness meditation is prescribed for a range of illnesses, including arthritis, back pain, cancer, celiac disease, chronic fatigue, diabetes, fibromyalgia, heart disease, irritable bowel syndrome, migraines and multiple sclerosis.⁵

"Mindfulness meditation is unique in that it is not directed toward getting us to be different from how we already are," says Karen Kassel Wegela, professor at Naropa University, where she focuses on integrating psychotherapy and Buddhist psychological principles.⁶ Instead, meditation teaches people to be present with whatever is happening, no matter what it is, she explains. This can be incredibly beneficial mental training for people with chronic health issues. The way to alleviate suffering, Wegela states, is to go more deeply into the present moment and into ourselves rather than changing the situation or ourselves.

Founded in 1979, the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction Program (MBSR) at the University of Massachusetts focuses on intensive training in mindfulness meditation.⁷ Now taught widely in medical settings, this form of mindfulness has been researched using rigorous scientific methods. MBSR focuses on the mental and physical effects that can be produced through mindfulness.⁸ Research has shown that MBSR contributes to pain management in people living with chronic pain.⁹ And, it has been shown to help alleviate depression, anxiety and stress in breast cancer patients.¹⁰

Other forms of mindfulness practiced in therapeutic settings include mindfulness-based cognitive therapy, dialectical behavior therapy, and acceptance and commitment therapy. Each has its own characteristics, but the common denominator is staying in the present.

The Physical Effects of Mindfulness

Mindfulness goes beyond treating psychological issues related to chronic illness. A study of people with chronic heart disease demonstrated that MBSR had a positive effect on blood pressure and body mass index, two biomarkers that are strongly correlated with health and disease.¹¹

Brain imaging reveals that mindfulness practice leads to alterations in the brain's structure, which means the concept of mindfulness "rewiring" the brain isn't just metaphorical. There's an actual neurological process at work.^{5,12} Regions involved in body awareness consistently change with mindfulness. These include changes in the way people experience their bodies in relation to the outside world, as well as the ways in which they perceive the internal world of the body.^{12,13} One example of perceiving the body differently is that people who practice mindfulness tend to experience less pain.⁵ Raye says it is this reshaping of the relationship with pain that allows pain to be released.

Another area of the brain that mindfulness alters is the prefrontal cortex.¹² This is the part of the brain involved in personality, impulse control, complex planning and, not surprisingly, attention.¹⁴ Six additional regions of the brain also change with meditation.¹²

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Neuroimaging studies also show that mindfulness meditation improves cognitive performance.¹⁵ One study determined that even brief meditation training (totaling four sessions) improved visuospatial processing, working memory and executive functioning — changes formerly associated only with long-term meditation.¹⁶

Tips for Starting a Mindfulness Meditation Practice

Be patient. Raye says people's expectations about meditation can hinder their experience of the process. Rather than expecting huge changes immediately, be receptive to what is happening, even if it doesn't feel like much. Keep at it, and the benefits will accumulate over time.

Go easy on yourself. Raye encourages people to avoid being too hard on themselves if they aren't having what they perceive as the ultimate meditation experience. Mindfulness meditation isn't about being distraction-free. It's about learning to come back to the present when distractions happen, while

cultivating internal kindness toward the mind and its tendency to meander.

Drop expectations. Being with "what is" can be liberating, unless "what is" is replaced with "what should be." Developing a concept about what should be is a way of avoiding the present entirely, not unlike the way the mind already attempts to dodge the moment and find harborage in what was (e.g., the past) and what might be (e.g., the future).

Expectations are another way of rejecting what's happening in the present moment. "Mindfulness, paying precise, nonjudgmental attention to the details of our experience as it arises and subsides, doesn't reject anything," Wegela says. "Instead of struggling to get away from experiences we find difficult, we practice being able to be with them."

Go deeper. About two years into her practice, Raye realized she needed guidance to better understand the effect meditation was having on her health and well-being. For her, the next step involved learning from an expert. This is a common route meditators take. Teachers come in all shapes and sizes. They can be found at universities, in local meditation centers and even in healthcare settings in the form of trained therapists and psychiatrists. Indirect teaching is available through books and online. Teaching can also be found through retreats that can be as short as a day or two.

Resources

- **ACLU Mindful Awareness Research Center:**

marc.ucla.edu/default.cfm

ACLU offers free guided meditations in English and Spanish. Some are as short as five minutes.

- **Center for Mindfulness:** www.umassmed.edu/cfm

The Center for Mindfulness at the University of Massachusetts maintains a mindfulness-based stress reduction teacher directory on its website, in addition to videos, mindfulness chatrooms and a virtual meditation room.

- **Mindful:** www.mindful.org/meditation/mindfulness-getting-started

This website defines mindfulness and describes the basics of mindfulness practice. It includes short audio and video clips that facilitate the process.

- **MIT Medical:**

medical.mit.edu/community/sleep/resources

For sleep problems, MIT offers several mindfulness meditation audio downloads, including one on mindful breathing.

- **Palouse Mindfulness:**

palousemindfulness.com/resources.html

This site offers free self-paced online training in mindfulness-based stress reduction, as well as a number of resources, including audio recordings, book recommendations and retreats.

- **Tara Brach:** www.tarabrach.com

Brach blends Western psychology and Eastern spiritual practices and has written extensively about working through difficult issues and experiences through meditation. Her website includes a free library of guided meditations.

Putting It into Practice: A Simple Mindfulness Skill

Observing and describing is an essential mindfulness skill that can be used throughout the day, not just during meditation. Observing means paying attention to whatever is going on. All the senses are involved in observing, including sights, sounds, scents and textures.¹⁷

Describing means labeling whatever is observed, but without judgment or evaluation. Describing pays attention to what is observed, not thoughts and ideas about what is observed. "The waiting room is busy" is an example of describing. "The waiting room is stressful" is an example of adding an evaluation to the description.

Observing and describing are central to meditation as well. As thoughts enter the mind, they can be noted, labeled without judgment and dismissed. It can be helpful to envision the thoughts floating away in helium-filled balloons or being placed into a box where they can be revisited later.

Being mindful means being present, not just in the present. The benefit of this orientation is that, over time, it can bring the mind into sharper focus and make distractions — including inner distractions such as worrying — less

powerful.¹⁸ “When we are mindful, we show up for our lives,” Wegela says.

From research and people’s direct experiences, we know mindfulness can have profound physical and psychological effects. It can help people experience the symptoms of their illness differently, it can change important health biomarkers and it can reshape the brain. At the same time, mindfulness is not the one and only answer where chronic illnesses are concerned. As Raye says, it’s important to find the healing modalities that work for each person and his or her condition — and that complement each other. Mindfulness is one tool among many that, in combination, can produce lasting benefits. ■

DANA HENRY is a writer and editor in the Kansas City area who specializes in science, medicine and health.

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