

Mindfulness and Stress Reduction

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Inner peace can be so elusive. Just when you think you have it something or someone comes along and pulls you off center! In the hectic, information overloaded whirlwind of a life most of us find ourselves caught up in these days, we can't take inner peace for granted. Perhaps more than ever, it's something we need to cultivate to counter the forces that threaten to overwhelm our sanity and sense of wellbeing.

Meditation is now widely accepted by both the medical profession and the public as a means of facilitating the state of awareness, relaxation, and inner peace we need to help us cope with stress, pain and illness. The endorsement of such practices by the medical profession is due in part to the pioneering work of a Harvard physician by the name of Herbert Benson. Dr. Benson gave research subjects instructions for sitting quietly for a period of time while keeping their attention focused on one word or phrase each time they exhaled. He discovered that this simple form of meditation had an immediate calming effect, accompanied by physiological changes such as reductions in blood pressure, heart rate, and muscle tension. He called this calming effect the "relaxation response." The relaxation response is the opposite of the "fight or flight" response, which is the state of physiological hyper-arousal we experience whenever we perceive ourselves to be in a threatening or highly stressful situation.

Everyone is capable of inducing the state of physiological calmness and inner peace that Benson refers to as the relaxation response. It requires no special skill or aptitude; simply a willingness to devote some time to focusing our attention, one-pointedly, on something such as our breath. Practicing meditation in this way on a daily basis is likely to produce a sense of inner calmness that may help us respond to stressful situations with greater equanimity. It may also help reduce anxiety, improve our quality of sleep, boost our immune system, relieve headaches, bodily tension and pain, and increase our overall sense of wellbeing.

There are many books, classes and programs to help us learn how to induce the relaxation response and cultivate mindfulness and inner peace. In my experience with individuals suffering from chronic stress, pain and illness, the comprehensive program developed by Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn can be very effective. Dr. Kabat-Zinn played a major role in bringing meditation into the mainstream through his stress reduction clinic at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center. Numerous follow-up studies of participants in his eight-week Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction program demonstrated dramatic reductions in overall medical symptoms, not only immediately following the classes, but also up to four years later.

In the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction classes I have offered, I have seen results similar to those reported in Kabat-Zinn's research. Let me illustrate this with the story of a participant, whom I will refer to as Alan. He joined one of my eight-week courses in order to learn how to

manage his debilitating symptoms of chronic pain. He had been on disability leave for over a year due to severe physical pain compounded by anxiety and depression following a work-related injury.

At the end of the first class, Alan reported that the "body scan" practice had produced a wonderful release of tension and pain from his legs. The body scan involves slowly moving one's attention throughout the various parts of the body and zeroing in on the sensations in each part, while visualizing one's breath flowing through that area. During the third class, Alan was very surprised to discover that he was able to do most of the yoga poses that were being taught without aggravating the pain in his legs. Later in the program, he gained useful insights into his tendency toward an overly aggressive communication style and was able to modify this to some extent. He also reported that the mindfulness practices taught in the program were helping him enjoy his food more, while at the same time, giving him greater control over his eating habits. Mid-way through the program, Alan was able to start back to work on a part-time basis. Despite the stress involved in his return to work, he met with success and was able to maintain the gains he had made in terms of symptom reduction and his sense of wellbeing.

Those interested in learning more about Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction may wish to read Jon Kabat-Zinn's "Full Catastrophe Living: Using the Wisdom of Your Body and Mind to Face Stress, Pain and Illness."

Suggested Readings and Tapes

Wherever You Go There You Are: Mindfulness Meditation in Everyday Life, by John Kabat-Zinn

Full Catastrophe Living: Using the Wisdom of Your Body and Mind to Face Stress, Pain and Illness, by Jon Kabat-Zinn

Stress Reduction Tapes Website: www.mindfulnessstapes.com