

## **Mindfulness** by Rachel Hasper, M.A., LPC, Clinical Therapist

Last week I went to a wonderful workshop on the topic of mindfulness. In the clinical world I hear this term mentioned over and over again, and the applicability of it seems to reach most paradigms of therapeutic practice. In my daily life, I also seem to hear it all over the place: in the media and news headlines, articles about living in the moment, tweets about the practice of mindfulness meditation, books about the gift of now, a new celebrity getting a tattoo that reads "be present."

But is all this attention on mindfulness really worthwhile? I believe that the answer is yes, because mindfulness has actually been shown to change the brain! Daniel J. Siegel states in his book, "The Mindful Brain," that this tending to our here and now experiences "creates scientifically recognized enhancements in our physiology, our mental functions, and our interpersonal relationships"(2007). This research shows that the practice of mindfulness changes the brain, specifically the prefrontal cortex. The host of last week's workshop, Dr. Kimberly McCallum, shared with us that our prefrontal cortex is responsible for the following:

- attunement
- emotion regulation
- response flexibility
- empathy
- self reflection
- bravery
- fear extinction
- intuition
- morality

The more we practice mindfulness the more we become in charge of our prefrontal cortex.

Some of the benefits of mindfulness are:

- enhanced sense of wellbeing
- increased ability to spot assumptions/judgments that get in the way of happiness
- increased ability to navigate hard times
- increased sense of what's truly important
- increased sense of compassion for oneself and others
- decreased emotional reactivity
- improved immune function and accelerated rate of healing

What exactly is mindfulness and how does one begin to practice?

John Kabat Zinn states that, "Mindfulness involves paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment and non-judgmentally."

To practice mindfulness, try to keep your attention on the here and now, just NOTICING thoughts, feelings, sensations without judging or clinging to them. Being mindful is accepting things just as they are, letting go of the "should's," "must's," and "ought's," that we often say to ourselves, and bringing our awareness to what is happening right in this moment - that means turning our focus away from the past or future, but staying focused on the here and now.

How is it that we actually achieve this "here and now" state of mind?

PRACTICE! I often tell my clients that living well takes a whole lot of work and discipline. But like most things that we do, the more we practice, the easier these tasks become. Just as learning to ride a bicycle at first feels awkward, unnatural and takes work to master, eventually we learn to pedal, steer and balance. The payoff is that eventually riding a bike becomes fun and easy; We can pick up a bike and ride whenever we like without too much effort. This is also true for mindfulness: the more we practice despite the initial difficulty and awkwardness, the easier and more natural it will become. It is also important to know that the state of mindfulness is not a destination. One does not practice for a given amount of time and then reach a final resting point. Mindfulness is an action we must do again and again. It is a conscious decision to keep turning our attention to the present moment.

To get started, try this exercise:

Plan some time where you will be uninterrupted in a place that is quiet and free of distraction. Sit comfortably. Turn your attention to your breath, paying attention to the sensations: the way the air feels coming in through your nose, your lungs expanding, how your breath feels as you exhale. Also pay attention to any other physical sensation: the position of your arms, legs, head, neck, scanning for any tensions and making any adjustments to your position if necessary. Continue to focus on your breath. When your focus wanders away from your breath, and it will, gently return your attention to your breathing. Sometimes it helps to imagine the thoughts that creep into your head floating away on clouds or passing by on a conveyer belt. The key in mindfulness meditation is not that we stop our mind from thinking. The goal of practice is that we notice our thoughts without attaching to them and without judging them. Notice your thought and return your focus to your breath. Notice your thought and return your focus to your breath. Notice your thought and return your focus to your breath.... Continue practicing this for as long as you are able. Most authors on the practice of mindfulness suggest about 20 minutes per day, but most also say that getting into a regular and consistent practice, no matter if it is 5 minutes or 45 minutes is the most important.

**A great introduction to what mindfulness is and how to practice:  
Real Happiness, Sharon Salzberg**

**Some of my favorite resources on mindfulness:**

**The Mindful Brain, Daniel Siegel**

**Anything by Jon Kabat-Zinn**

**The Wise Heart, Jack Kornfield**

**Everyday Zen, Charlotte Beck**

**Books by Thich Nhat-Hanh**

**<http://www.huffingtonpost.com/elisha-goldstein-phd/can-mindfulness-really-re b 1017931.html>**

**<http://www.sharonsalzberg.com/>**

**Some great videos:**

**<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3nwwKbM vJc>**

**<http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/06/22/ted-talks-goldie-hawn-dan n 619871.html>**