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CALMING THE MIND

Angeliki Bogosian, Research Fellow at King's College London's Institute of Psychiatry talks about "mindfulness" and how it can help in MS

What does mindfulness involve?

Mindfulness is a technique that allows us to respond with more skilful control to whatever is happening right now, whether that is good or bad. It involves redirecting our attention from worrying about what has happened or may happen, and instead focusing on the present with an open-minded curiosity.

Mindfulness is a simple concept. During a mindfulness practice, participants are asked to sit upright and to focus on something straightforward, like their breathing. The aim is to nurture a curiosity about these sensations – not to explain them, but to know them.

The 8-week course

Mindfulness has been consistently shown to improve health and wellbeing. It can be used to feel calmer, less anxious, less depressed and to think more clearly. The National Institute of Clinical Excellence (NICE, 2004) now recommends mindfulness, with GPs referring adults to 8-week courses designed to reduce stress and help prevent recurrent depression. Mindfulness evolved as an aid to people who had chronic conditions to which there were no medical solutions. It has grown in its use for physical and mental health conditions ever since.

Brain imaging studies have shown that consistent mindful practice profoundly changes the structure and function of the brain, improving the quality of thought, feeling and concern for others. Mindfulness can also help strengthen the immune system, which could be

welcome news to anyone with a chronic illness (Davidson, 2003). A previous trial has also found that mindfulness is of benefit to those with multiple sclerosis, easing fatigue, depression and overall quality of life (Grossman et al., 2010).

The 3-minute breathing space: a simple exercise to try

Bring awareness to your posture. The weight of you going down, the height of you going up.

STEP 1: NOTICING. Ask yourself the question, 'what is going on for me at the moment?' and notice and acknowledge whatever is there, maybe in the mind or in the body or in the events around you.

STEP 2: GATHERING. Gather the awareness and bring attention directly to the breath. Feel the sensations of breathing deep in the belly and whenever you notice that the mind has wandered, just connect with wherever it has got to and gently return to the anchor of the breath in the belly.

STEP 3: EXPANDING. Expand your awareness around the breath to include the body as a whole sitting and a sense of the breath breathing in the whole body. Becoming aware of the space your body occupies in the room.

Why can mindfulness be useful for people with MS and their family/carers?

By becoming more mindful and more aware of our thoughts, feelings, and body sensations, we give ourselves the chance of greater freedom and choice. It also means that we are less likely to strive for too long towards goals that it may be wiser to let go of for a while. Mindful awareness helps us to become fully conscious of the world as it is, rather than how we wish it could be.

Difficult things are part of life. It is how we handle those things that makes the difference between whether they control our lives or whether we can relate more lightly to them. Living with a condition like MS, it may sometimes be difficult to stay positive, especially when you feel unwell, your life has become restricted or your future appears uncertain. Therefore, you may feel frustrated, angry, demoralised, worried, anxious or depressed.

Feeling tense, angry, stressed, anxious or low in mood produces physiological changes like increased fatigue and muscle pain, impaired memory and concentration, and poor sleep. Even if we try to shut out these emotions or ignore them, we usually still suffer the physiological effects.

MS symptoms plus your feelings about them can be viewed as messengers coming to tell you something important about your body or about your mind. Tuning into your symptoms gives you much more of a chance to remember to honour your body and listen to the messages it is trying to give you.

How can people access mindfulness courses?

BOOKS

“Mindfulness for Health, a practical guide to relieving pain, reducing stress and restoring wellbeing,” by Vidyamala Burch and Danny Penman.

“Full Catastrophe living, how to cope with stress, pain and illness using mindfulness meditation,” by Jon Kabat-Zinn.

“The mindful way through depression: freeing yourself from chronic unhappiness,” by Mark Williams, John D. Teasdale & Jon Kabat-Zinn

WEBSITES

<http://www.breathworks-mindfulness.org.uk> The Breathworks courses are for people experiencing chronic pain.

<http://www.everyday-mindfulness.org> A blog about mindfulness, written by Gareth who has MS.

<http://www.mindful.org> This website contains articles, news and short mindfulness practices.

<http://www.getsomeheadspace.com> Here, you can find a free course called Take10, which is ten minute long meditations that will give you some of the basics of mindfulness.

NHS COURSES/ RESEARCH TRIALS

Some NHS services offer mindfulness courses for free or at a low cost. Ask your GP, neurologist or MS nurse to find out whether there are any available in your area.

You can also visit the MS Society and MS Trust websites for any mindfulness trials for people with MS and/or their family members.

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