

## **MINDFULNESS:**

### **The Untapped Innate Catalyst for Healing, Happiness and Health**

By: R. Murali Krishna, MD

Our everyday lives are so frantic that we sometimes lose sight of what brings us happiness and contentment. Within each of us lies a great strength in our mind that many of us have yet to discover and to develop fully. This strength is mindfulness or what some refer to as “heartfulness.” Learning the art of this age-old practice can have a significant positive impact on our inner peace and health and can facilitate profound emotional, physical and spiritual healing and growth. People are becoming more aware of this beneficial habit. The Huffington Post has declared 2014 “the year of mindfulness”.

**Mindfulness** is the art of paying attention to the present moment with intention, openness, curiosity and without judgment – there is no good and there is no bad. It is a willingness to accept what *is*. It is experiencing each moment as it unfolds in its purest form without judgment and without coloring it with our own biases and perceptions – it’s letting go of past regrets and the worries of what the future might bring. It is learning the practice of being in the present moment, consciously being aware, and giving our full focused attention without judging. The benefits are profound. With regular practice, mindfulness is a powerful tool that can help you improve your overall well-being.

**Mental, physical health benefits and possible applications:** Most of us have experienced mindfulness at some point in our lives. Modern science is revealing *if we learn the art of mindfulness and sustain the practice over a period of time*, then this can have a positive effect on our inner peace and happiness as well as on our health. For example, recent research done at respectable institutions, such as Harvard University, UCLA, University of California San Francisco, University of Wisconsin, and Carnegie Mellon University point out some of the following positive changes: increased sense of well-being, inner peace, happiness, emotional regulation, improved memory and learning, improved resilience, improved relationships, enhanced decision making and judgment, decreased impulsivity as well as interesting yet fascinating changes in the brain and body and the way our genes are expressed, such as reduction in stress response, increased antibody response to infection and decreased pro-inflammatory gene expression.

Recent clinical studies have documented the physical and mental health benefits of mindfulness. For example, the rate at which our cells age through improved telomere length and maintenance. A telomere contains specialized DNA sequences at the end of each chromosome which protects the chromosome from deterioration by slowing down its destruction. Lifestyle changes in diet, exercise, stress management, mindfulness and social support may result in longer telomeres which play a role in cellular aging by providing protection from some of the aging-related diseases. Dr. Elizabeth Blackburn from the University of California San Francisco was awarded the Nobel Prize in Physiology in 2009 for her work with telomerase and telomeres. She discovered an enzyme that plays a key role in normal cell function as well as in cell aging. The enzyme is called telomerase and it produces tiny units of DNA that seal off the ends of chromosomes, which contain the body’s genes.

Additionally, mindfulness practice and learning to reduce and manage stress in healthy ways contribute to a reduction in the size and excessive reactivity of the amygdala. The amygdala lies within the limbic system of the brain and has been shown to play a key role in the processing of emotions, memories and in decision-making. The amygdala is involved in appraising and reacting to perceived stress. Stress has significant adverse effects on health and is a risk factor for many illnesses. Similarly, Dr. Sara Lazar and her team at Harvard Medical School found that mindfulness based stress management practices lead to increases in regional gray matter density.

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Recent discoveries and advances in science such as these have led to the emerging field of human social genomics, a relatively new field of research that examines why and how different social factors and processes (e.g., social stress, conflict, isolation, attachment, etc.) affect the activity of the genome. This emerging field has shown that the activity of literally hundreds of genes (called "gene profiles" or "gene programs") can be affected by the physical and social environments that humans inhabit.

These latest studies have many positive implications for the practice of mindfulness. Science is revealing that these practices lead to the improvement of many emotional and physical illnesses, such as, mood disorders, anxiety disorders, addictive disorders, sleep disorders, chronic pain, as well as metabolic disorders including obesity, gastrointestinal disorders, skin disorders, cardiovascular disorders and other inflammatory disorders.

### Mindfulness and Stress Reduction

Now are you curious about learning more about mindfulness? Mindfulness can start with the very simple practice of learning how to become more consciously aware and “mindful” of many of our everyday, mundane activities – the types of activities that we do everyday often in “auto pilot.” A good place to start is with the mind-calming practice of learning to focus on our breath. Find a comfortable spot. Close your eyes. Breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth, allowing your belly to be soft. Breathing slowly and deeply, feeling yourself present, here and now, relaxing more and more with each breath that you take in and each breath that you let out. Now focus on breathing with all five senses - really focus on how the breath feels entering your nostrils – air going in, air going out, feel the touch, pressure, the flow, temperature, velocity, and any other sensations such as tingling, and other characteristics of your breath. Concentrate only on your breath. It is human nature for the mind to wander – this will happen – when it does, simply observe the distraction non-judgmentally and then consciously bring your attention back to your breath – feel the air going in and the air going out. Is the air warm or cool? You will notice that you will continue to experience distractions – again, gently and non-judgmentally observe each distraction and then refocus on your breathing. Continue practicing this mindfulness exercise daily.

Now begin incorporating this practice into other routine activities of daily living such as walking, connecting with nature, brushing your child’s hair, listening, reading, observing, eating, driving, showering, cooking. This practice can be extended into almost any experience in life. For example, often we take a shower “mindlessly” without actually experiencing all of the sensations of the shower. Instead of focusing on the act of showering, we often spend this time “in our heads” thinking about what happened yesterday or worrying about what might happen today, tomorrow or even at some distant point in the future. Stop. Begin to focus on the shower, being aware of the present moment, experiencing the shower with all five of the senses. Notice the steam rising or the streams of water as they make their journey from the showerhead to the drain. How does the water feel flowing over your body – is it warm or cool? Listen to the flow of the water - what sounds do you hear? Smell the aroma of the soap and shampoo – what do they smell like? Experience the “flow” of being in the present moment, focusing all of your attention on the rejuvenating feeling of the water as it unfolds around you.

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### A Mindful Life

An important component of mindfulness is cultivating an awareness to its fullest degree, nurturing a deep sense of gratitude and feeling a sense of harmony with each moment of our life as it unfolds. This is a great gift we can give ourselves and our loved ones. By learning to embrace and adapt to change and to accept the things we cannot change, we will benefit from increased inner peace and greater harmony in our relationships with others. When we experience life in its purest form, without clouding it with our perceptions and judgments, we will be at peace with what *is*.

With regular and routine practice of these and other similar exercises in mindfulness, we can learn to reduce our excessive thinking and catastrophizing that goes on in our minds and learn the mind calming skill of being in the present moment. As we develop the practice of incorporating this skill into our daily routines, we will notice profound and positive changes in our emotional, physical and spiritual well-being. As we learn to put these skills into practice, we will find that we have more inner peace and happiness; greater ability to modulate our emotions; an increase in our creativity, memory and learning; positive changes in our personal and professional relationships; increased resilience; improved performance; and overall healing of our mind, body and soul.

**Mindfulness** has the potential to positively transform your life and the lives of those you love and serve.