

PFSP Perspectives: *Alberta Doctors' Digest*

See personal and professional reality more clearly

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Show up. Pay attention. That's a four-word definition of mindfulness. But show up and pay attention to what?

Thich Nhat Hanh, a Buddhist monk and teacher, proposes that we have unlimited opportunities to be mindful in the course of a day.

In his book, *Peace is Every Step*, he provides several examples of where to discover the present moment in the mundane and repetitive tasks of daily life.

He encourages us to pause and connect momentarily with the present moment prior to sending or receiving a phone call (you can also try this with email messages and texts).

When we are driving, he suggests, "See the red light as a bell of mindfulness, reminding us to return to the present moment."

When we sit down to eat, he recommends briefly bringing to mind all the human hands that have worked to produce or prepare our food before we move fork from plate to mouth. Whenever we find ourselves standing in a queue, consider it an opportunity for three or four mindful breaths.

Nhat Hanh concludes, "Our true home is in the present moment. . . . We need only to find ways to bring our body and mind back to the present moment so we can touch what is refreshing, healing and wondrous."

Mindfulness is a mind/body awareness practice; other related practices include certain kinds of yoga, tai chi and transcendental meditation.

The practice of mindfulness is not about drifting off into a dreamy state of semi-consciousness. Rather, mindfulness is repeatedly choosing to focus our awareness and concentration on what is happening around us or within us.

When I introduce mindfulness to a group of colleagues, I sometimes lead the group in an exercise I call the ABCs of mindfulness, which I've adapted from the ABCs of resuscitation.

A is for Awareness, awareness of our body, posture, head, neck, shoulders, lower back, hands and feet – places where physical tension tends to accumulate. During this quick body scan, pick

one area and then mindfully relax the tension in your jaw muscles, across your shoulders or in your clenched hands.

B is for breathing. The recurring in-breath and out-breath is our life support. Nhat Hanh encourages students to repeat silently to themselves as they attend to the act of their breathing: “Breathing in, I calm my body. Breathing out, I smile.”

Another simple exercise to punctuate a busy day and replenish flagging energy is to take 30 seconds and gently pay attention to five successive, unhurried breaths.

Too busy to observe five breaths? Fortunately for those living under extreme time constraints there remains **C for Concentration.**

Time for a pulse check. Pay attention to five or six successive beats of your own pulse. Notice whether it’s fast or slow, regular or irregular. For a fraction of a second, make the connection between “life” and “blood.” Know for an instant that the alternative to the beating of your heart is . . . mysterious.

According to Jon Kabat-Zinn in *Mindfulness for Beginners*, “Mindfulness is paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, non-judgementally, as if your life depended on it.”

Learning to accept the reality around us with equanimity is as important as showing up to it.

Acceptance does not mean abandoning our critical faculties. It does mean letting go of preconceptions and attachments.

It means addressing our insatiable desire to compare ourselves to others, and our tendency to judge people and situations first and ask questions later.

And what about “. . . as if your life depended on it”? Through the practice of mindfulness one can acquire a sharper awareness of the rate of time passing.

Sitting for 20 minutes in silent mindfulness meditation can be one of those rare activities where time seems to pass slowly. Mindfulness is a way to adjust the contrast and turn down the volume in our lives.

In 1979 Kabat-Zinn founded the Stress Reduction Clinic and the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care, and Society at the University of Massachusetts Medical School.

Mindfulness-based stress reduction is an example of a Buddhist meditation practice borrowed, adapted and incorporated into a Western health-related setting.

Kabat-Zinn explains in *Coming to our Senses*: “All of Buddhism is oriented toward waking up from the delusions we spin for ourselves and the ones we are conditioned into through past experiences. . . .

“In the past twenty-five hundred years, the various meditative traditions within Buddhism have developed, explored and refined a range of highly sophisticated and effective methods for the cultivation of mindfulness and of the wisdom and compassion that emerge naturally from its practice.”

Individual wisdom and compassion can emerge when we are able to show up to the joys and sorrow of life – no matter whether we are, in King Lear’s words, “a soul in bliss” or “bound upon a wheel of fire.”

Much depends on the practitioner’s ability to cultivate an even-minded acceptance of things as they are.

Ronald D. Siegel, Assistant Clinical Professor of Psychology, Harvard Medical School, and author of *The Mindfulness Solution: Everyday Practices for Everyday Problems*, describes himself as “a student of mindfulness meditation” who incorporates mindfulness techniques in his private clinical practice.

Siegel also teaches mindfulness to groups of mental-health practitioners across North America.

In his two-day workshop, *The Power of Mindfulness: Mindfulness Inside and Outside the Therapy Hour*, he describes a continuum of mindfulness practice that can range from informal opportunities to be mindful throughout the day (like the ones proposed by Nhat Hanh) to formal daily sitting meditation practice to intensive retreat practice.

This deliberate repetitive choice “to show up” is often a part of the practice of medicine, where we choose, day after day, to be present to our patients, colleagues, family and to ourselves.

The reality in both the practice of medicine and the practice of mindfulness, however, is that we are not always willing or able to show up and pay attention. Sometimes we get bored, distracted, annoyed, angry or exhausted.

Minutes, hours and days of practice and life may slide away in mental states characterized by inattention, mindless repetition or inordinate worry about the past or future.

Increased proficiency in the practice of mindfulness helps us to see, more clearly, personal and professional reality as it is.

Aware of the imperfections of our practice, we renew our efforts to be more fully alive in the present, more of the time.

Siegel’s workshop combines didactic with interactive. He describes core components of mindfulness practice. In his presentation he includes brief one- and two-person experiential exercises for participants to increase their mindfulness.

He also specifies for therapists which mindfulness techniques are likely to be effective as adjuncts to therapy for patients with depression, anxiety, chronic pain and other psychophysiological disorders.

Mindfulness as an adjunct to various psychotherapies, including cognitive behavioural therapy, has become more mainstream over the past two decades.

Investigations into the effect of mindfulness on child rearing, education, personal relationships, performing arts and executive management are ongoing.

What is the quality of the research into mindfulness and the evidence?

Ospina et al. published, in 2007, *Meditation Practices for Health: State of the Research*. They examined the results of 400 clinical trials in their review of the effects of meditation practices for health care.

Five categories of meditation practices were identified – mantra meditation, mindfulness meditation, yoga, tai chi and qigong.

They observed that methodological quality was often poor, firm conclusions could not be drawn about the effects of meditation practices for health care and that future research needed to be more rigorous.

That rather negative appraisal of the research into meditation practices says as much about research methods as it does about the subject under investigation.

The scientific study of mindfulness continues.

In a recent article in the popular press, “This is Your Brain on Mindfulness,” Michael J. Baime, MD, Clinical Associate Professor of Medicine, University of Pennsylvania, describes examples of recent research by neuroscientists into the effects of mindfulness practice on the anatomy and physiology of the brain.

For the past decade, the University of Massachusetts Medical School has organized an annual conference entitled *Investigating and Integrating Mindfulness-based Interventions into Medicine, Health Care, and Society*. The 10th Annual International Scientific Conference will take place in Norwood, Massachusetts, March 28-April 1, 2012.

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