Stress Management: Mindfulness

What is mindfulness?

Mindfulness is the practice of being aware and alert in the present moment, without judging. You focus only on the now and do not think of the past or future. Mindfulness is a way to quiet your body and calm your mind. It can help you deal with stress, tension, anxiety, and pain. It can be done at any time. It helps in several ways:

- It helps you to relax. The more you practice mindfulness, the less stress you will feel. It can also help you sleep better.
- It can take your mind off what is bothering you. While you focus on the present and what your body is feeling, you think less about other things.
- Over time, mindfulness can help you be aware of automatic responses and habits. When you are aware of these habits and responses, you can decide to change those that you no longer want. For example, if you smoke when you get angry, you could decide to take a walk instead.

How is it done?

To start learning mindfulness:

1. Set aside 10 to 20 minutes in a quiet place with few distractions. It helps to practice in the same place and at the same time each day.
2. Sit up straight, with your feet on the ground and your body well supported, so you can completely relax.
3. Focus on your breathing. You don't have to breathe deeply, just breathe naturally. Pay attention to the feeling of breathing. Notice the air moving in and out of your nostrils. Notice the feeling of your lungs filling and emptying. Simply follow the movement and rhythm of each breath.
4. Tune into the parts of your body that feel tense or painful, such as your jaws, neck, shoulders, or legs. As you notice tension or pain, name it, accept it, and add it to your focus as you breathe. For example: "I breathe in and I feel pain in my knee. I breathe out, and I accept the pain." Also notice the parts of your body that are not tense or in pain.
5. Notice sounds in your environment: You might hear a bird, traffic, a furnace, or a fan. You might notice smells such as plants, food, or rain. As you notice things, name them, accept them as they are, and add them to your focus as you breathe. For example: "I breathe in and I hear a dog barking; I breathe out, and I accept the sound. I breathe in and I smell flowers nearby; I breathe out and I accept the smell."
6. As you notice feelings and thoughts passing through your mind, name and accept them too, and return your focus to your breathing. Don't fight the thoughts or feelings, or try to deal with them. Observe your thoughts, rather than letting them take over. Just name them and breathe. For example: "I breathe in, and I notice that I feel nervous. I breathe out and accept that

feeling. I breathe in, and I think about my doctor's appointment tomorrow. I breathe out and accept that thought."

7. At the end of your 10 to 20 minute practice, return your focus to your daily life.

Through mindfulness, you may notice that you feel certain emotions in one part of your body. For example, you may feel anger in your stomach, neck, or hands. Once you name what you feel and accept it, the emotion does not control you. You can focus on other things in the present moment.

Any time you start having stressful thoughts, shift your attention to what is happening right now. You will notice your mind quieting and the thoughts becoming less stressful. Simply by focusing on breathing and accepting, you may feel more relaxed. This is helpful for both physical and emotional health.

After practicing mindfulness for a while, you will find that you can focus better and react to things more calmly. You can also be more mindful when you garden, clean house, or do other activities. Mindfulness helps decrease the stress in your life and helps you feel able to deal with whatever life hands you.

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