

My Trouble With Mindfulness

by Jill Suttie

Jill Suttie knows the benefits of mindfulness, but she still doesn't practice it. What holds her back?

I can't say I'm not informed about the benefits of mindfulness.

Our Mindful Mondays series provides ongoing coverage of the exploding field of mindfulness research.

As a writer for Greater Good, I've read countless books on mindfulness and have been lucky to interview some of the leading scientists in the world who study it. I've written articles about mindfulness improving health and wellbeing for kids, teachers, pregnant women, and parents. And I've covered its positive effects on over-eating and sexual dysfunction. I know that it's a powerful intervention, good for psychological and physical health.

But I still don't practice it. At least, not in any formal, consistent way. There's just something—or maybe some things—that seem to get in my way. Part of it may be a matter of priorities and breaking the habit of inertia. But there are other hindrances to practicing, too—fears about how it may change me in maybe not so positive ways.

But still...all of that science! I decided that it was time for me to face fears by delving (yet again) into the research on mindfulness and talking with leaders in the field. Here is what I learned about my troubles with mindfulness when I posed some of my biggest questions to the experts.

Question #1: Will mindfulness disengage me from world problems?

When I went to a mindfulness meditation course some years ago, I remember this concern came up a lot in the class. People would ask, "Isn't it a cop-out to focus inward when there are so many problems in the world that need attention?" Or, "Won't mindfulness make me tune out the suffering of others?"

I must admit that concern resonated with me. So, I asked Rick Hanson—neuropsychologist and best-selling author of *Buddha's Brain*—what the science says about mindfulness and its impact on engagement with the world.

"First, it's a really important, legitimate, obvious question," he says. "But, if you think of examples of this—mindful people disengaging from the world—they are incredibly rare. Actually, as we tune more into ourselves, we become more able to tune into other people."

Research backs that up. In an experimental study led by Paul Condon of Northeastern University, participants assigned to an eight-week mindfulness meditation course were surreptitiously tested afterwards on their tendency to help someone in need. While seated in a waiting room with no empty seats, participants saw a woman (actually a confederate working with the researchers) on crutches and in obvious pain come into the room and lean against a wall.

Researchers wanted to see whether the participants trained in mindfulness would be more likely to get up and offer her their seat, even though two people other seated in the room (also confederates) ignored her. What they found was that participants who'd attended the meditation class got up five times more often than those who hadn't. In other words, the meditation course made them more likely to take compassionate action.

This may be due to the way mindfulness impacts structures in the brain, according to Hanson. Research has shown that mindfulness builds up brain tissue in the insula, which, in addition to being involved in "interoception"—or the perception of our internal bodily sensations—is also linked to experiencing empathy for other people; studies have also linked mindfulness to denser brain tissue in the temporo-parietal junction and the posterior cingulate cortex, regions involved in empathy and taking the perspective of someone else.

Mindfulness training may also help people to cope better with typical barriers to compassionate action, such as experiencing strong emotions—like fear, sadness, or anger—when confronted with the suffering of others, or when stressed out, says Hanson. Literally hundreds of studies have found that mindfulness meditation training—e.g. Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction, the program pioneered by Jon Kabat-Zinn—helps reduce stress and improve distress-tolerance.

Of course, we don't know that this translates directly into engagement in world problems. But, it does seem more likely than not that meditation strengthens rather than weakens our tendency to take action to help others. So much for fear number one.

Question #2: Will mindfulness make me less productive?

When I think of being productive, I don't think about sitting on a cushion, following my breath. In fact, that seems almost antithetical to getting things done.

But one of the most important aspects of mindfulness training is that it improves focus—your ability to maintain attention on what's going on both inside of you and in front of you.

According to Daniel Goleman, these attention skills are important for excelling at work, because focus is useful for sticking with problems, navigating relationships with colleagues, understanding your own motivations, avoiding emotional reactivity, and fostering innovation. His book, *Focus*, made the case for this.

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Research bears out the potential benefits of mindfulness in the workplace. In one 2012 study from researchers at the University of Washington, a group of human resource professionals were trained in either mindfulness meditation or relaxation skills over an eight-week period and were tested on how they handled complex multitasking. Participants who received mindfulness training remained more on task, with less task-switching, and reported better moods, than those who underwent relaxation training or were on a wait-list to receive training. This suggests that mindfulness helps us focus more efficiently on a task.

In a 2013 study by Erik Dane and Bradley Brummel, service workers in the restaurant business were measured on mindfulness levels, engagement at work, and their commitment to staying at their present job, with their job performance independently assessed by managers. The researchers found a positive correlation between workplace mindfulness and job performance that held true even when accounting for worker engagement, meaning that even among workers who all seemed engaged in their jobs, the mindful ones performed better. They also found evidence linking mindfulness to a worker's lower intent to leave the job, although this was not independent of how engaged that worker was in his or her job.

But what about those of us whose work requires creative, open thinking?

According to a 2012 randomized control study—the gold standard for empirical research—published in PLOS One, non-meditators who went through an eight-week mindfulness meditation course decreased their cognitive rigidity—the tendency to have difficulty taking in new information to solve problems—when compared to a wait-list group. In another study, participants who received mindfulness training increased the ability to solve insight-related problems better than those who didn't go through the training. These and other studies suggest that mindfulness can help people with tasks that involve less rigid thinking and more insight—both skills useful in creativity.

Question #3: Will mindfulness meditation take up too much of my time?

When I think of mindfulness meditation, I picture someone sitting under a tree in an idyllic retreat setting, not someone rushing to get the kids off to school or commuting to work. Who has time for something like that?

According to mindfulness researcher and teacher Shauna Shapiro, this question that comes up frequently among novice meditators—at least in the West, where we tend to be addicted to speed and productivity. But while she and others might argue that our lifestyle needs changing, there is also some good news about my concern: Even small commitments to practicing mindfulness meditation can make a positive change in your life—you don't need to completely rearrange your busy schedule for it.

In a 2011 study from the University of Wisconsin, non-meditators were trained in mindful attention meditation over a five-week period and tested on brain activity patterns using an EEG. Mindful meditators who practiced on average five to 16 minutes a day saw significant, positive changes in their brain patterns—patterns suggesting a greater orientation toward positive emotions and connections with others—as compared to those on a wait-list for the training.

In a 2010 study, participants were taught mindful breathing techniques for only 20 minutes over a three-day period; then they were tested to see how reactive they were to mild and stronger electrical shocks. After the mindfulness training, the participants experienced significantly less anxiety, less suffering from pain, and less reactivity to the pain relative to where they were beforehand.

And a 2008 study from Stanford University found that teaching a loving-kindness meditation to non-meditators—a practice involving sending out good wishes to oneself, a loved one, and a stranger, often taught in conjunction with mindful breathing practices—can have positive effects on one's mood and on positive evaluations of strangers. And this after only after seven minutes of training!

Still, before you get too excited, you should know that research on this is still in its infancy. In fact, research generally supports a dose-response to mindfulness meditation—the more, the better. But some meditation may be better than none.

For people like me who may have trouble getting over the time commitment thing, Shapiro suggests you get in touch with your motivation for doing meditation, and to commit to a certain time of day to do it. Like other skills, mindfulness will get stronger with practice.

“Research shows that our repeated behaviors shape our brain,” says Shapiro. “Mindfulness can become one of our repeated ‘habits,’ strengthening pathways that lead to greater awareness, happiness and freedom.”

You can also pick a practice that suits you, she adds—maybe a body scan practice if you have trouble connecting with your body, a loving-kindness meditation if you are suffering from a lot of negative thoughts, or a simple breath meditation if you are looking for calming stillness or a greater understanding of how your mind works. Starting with a practice that matches your needs may have the added benefit of motivating you to do more of it.

Hanson suggests that mindfulness need not be limited to the cushion, either. Once you've developed mindfulness skills through meditation, you can integrate mindfulness more into your daily life. “We can be mindful of the cars driving next to us, or mindful of the expression on a loved one's face,” he says. Mindfulness is present while we raise children, while we do cognitive therapy. It's not just about sitting.”

Question #4: Is mindfulness only for New Age-types (not me)?

Recently, a friend and I were talking about meditation and why we haven't really gotten into it. We know it's good for us; we've seen the research. But, even so, we still have one nagging concern: We don't want to become New Age stereotypes. You know what I mean—hippy-dippy, touchy-feely, “follow-your-bliss” types that others may dismiss.

But, according to a recent article in the New York Times Style Magazine by Tim Wu, mindfulness practices seem to be going mainstream. Wu writes, “Over the last decade, without much fanfare, the core tenets of Buddhism have migrated from the spiritual fringe to become widely accepted techniques for dealing with the challenges of daily life.”

In fact, though practicing mindfulness may indeed bring some people bliss, it can no longer be construed as a New Age fad. Search “mindfulness research” under Google Scholar, and you get over 78,000 hits—over 21,000 from just the last four years. Mindfulness has been studied from Harvard to UCLA, from the University of Texas to the University of Wisconsin, to see if it helps with pain, immune response function, over-eating, drug addiction, pregnancy, depression, obsessive-compulsive disorder. You name it, mindfulness has been tried, either to augment standard treatments or to replace them.

“Whether it's astronauts or professional athletes, more and more elite performers are appreciating the power of mindfulness and meditation training,” says Hanson, who adds that mindfulness teachings have also infiltrated settings as diverse as prisons, marine boot camps, and Fortune 500 companies.

Of course, that doesn't mean it's always easy. In fact, Hanson claims that, although there may be a lot of “hoo-ha” around mindfulness, it can be downright challenging.

“To be really open to your feelings and to look under the rocks of your own mind, you need guts,” he argues. “I would challenge people who think they are tough or strong to follow 10 breaths in a row, or to spend half an hour quietly coming back again and again to what living is like right now, and then tell me this is only for New Age wussies.”

In other words, one can safely assume mindfulness is not a New Age fad. And, if I decided to meditate, I would be in good company—lots of it. Mindfulness has even hit the halls of Congress, with Representative Tim Ryan, who represents Ohio's 17th Congressional District, being a staunch supporter of the practice.

So, far from being a stereotype, it appears that I'd be joining a movement that's only growing and gaining wider acceptance. And, I may become more productive, creative, and effective in the process—not to mention, less stressed and happier.

I guess my fears of mindfulness are just that—fears. Perhaps it's time to begin that long-overdue mindfulness practice and start seeing what this “hoo-ha” is all about.