

Be mindful – not mind full: five steps to improve your mental health

“Where did the time go?” This is a common question nearly all of us have thought at some point. Time seems to fly in our busy lives, as we juggle demanding jobs, parenting responsibilities, social commitments and household chores. We can often be so busy that life seems to pass us by. We may fail to see when someone we care about needs our attention, or notice a glorious day or even acknowledge that we may not be living our lives to the fullest.

More people are feeling this way, which is why the practice of mindfulness is becoming increasingly popular. It is a way of pulling us back to the present and living in the moment. Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn, Professor of Medicine Emeritus and creator of the Stress Reduction Clinic and the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care, and Society at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, defines it as “paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, non-judgmentally – as if your life depended on it.”

Though it has its roots in Buddhist meditation, a secular practice of mindfulness has recently entered the mainstream, in part through the work of Dr. Kabat-Zinn and his Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program, which he introduced in 1979. Since that time, thousands of studies have documented the physical and mental health benefits of mindfulness in general – and MBSR in particular – inspiring countless programs to adapt the model for schools, prisons, hospitals, veteran centers, and beyond.

Five steps to mindfulness

There are many ways to become more mindful and care about your life moment by moment. Five tips are:

- 1. Take five minutes each day to stop “doing” and experience “being.”** Take a bath, quietly drink some tea, listen to music, meditate or pray. Try mindfulness meditation: sit in a comfortable chair. Empty your mind and focus on your breathing – the “in” breath, then the “out” breath. If your mind begins to wander, refocus on your breathing.
- 2. Practice gratitude.** Think about things for which you are grateful. This brings your mind to the present moment and the things that are important in your life. Many people find it helpful to keep a gratitude journal in which they write down a certain number of things they are thankful for every day.
- 3. Have compassion.** When we are feeling stressed and overwhelmed it is easy to think we are the only ones struggling. Having compassion for others makes it easier to think about the positive aspects of our lives.
- 4. Accept yourself and others.** Stop striving for perfection and berating yourself because you are not perfect. Negative self-judgment damages your self-esteem and how you interact with others. It will also prevent you from taking action to improve your life.
- 5. Do not take life’s challenges too personally.** When we are confronted with a job loss, the end of a relationship or any difficult situation, we tend to blame ourselves and get stuck in “if only” thinking. This can send us into a state of inaction and depression. Instead, bring things into the present moment by acknowledging your feelings and asking what you are going to do, right now, to move forward.

If you fill every moment of your life with doing things – working, talking, playing on the computer, running errands – you may never give yourself a chance to simply *be*. Simply sitting and smelling the coffee isn’t just pleasant, it is important for our happiness and mental health.

The five R's of mental health

According to the World Health Organization, depression is the leading cause of disability worldwide, and is a major contributor to the global burden of disease. Given that one in four adults – or approximately 61.5 million Americans – experience mental illness in a given year, it is critical to understand the five R's of mental health.

1. Recognizing risk

Our bodies and our minds let us know when we are not functioning at our best. Each mental illness has its own characteristics and symptoms, although there are some general warning signs that might alert you that you or someone you care about may need professional help.

Physical

- Difficulty sleeping or fatigue
- Frequent colds, flu, or infections
- Rapid weight loss or gain

Intellectual

- Difficulty concentrating
- Procrastinating
- Excessive worrying

Emotional

- Feeling irritable
- Feeling trapped
- Feeling incompetent

Personal well-being

- Isolating oneself from friends and family
- Excessive busyness
- Loss of sense of humor

2. Resilience

Part of good mental health involves being resilient. Resilience is the ability to recover from adversity and cope with life's challenges. On a daily basis, resilient people think ahead and don't shy away from considering fearful or unpalatable scenarios. They are flexible, adaptable, optimistic and have a sense of purpose. They also have good problem-solving skills, strong social networks, and learn from failure and persevere. The good news is resilience is something that can be developed and strengthened.

3. Recovery

Recovery is very personal and unique for each individual and depends on the individual's values, resilience, and inherent self-worth. However, every recovery involves the following:

- A good understanding of what is wrong
- The support of family, friends, and/or co-workers
- Good self-care – looking after one's physical, mental and emotional well-being
- Acknowledgment that recovery is not a linear process but a continual growth with occasional setbacks

4. Return to work

If you are returning to work after a mental illness, be sure to:

- Talk to your manager and be open about what you are able to do and what you are not able to do
- Know when to say "no" or ask for help – work with your manager on what you should do if you have a concern or find that you are struggling

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- Expect a few questions from co-workers about how you are doing; prepare and rehearse an answer so that even if you are caught off guard, you can still respond in a respectful and professional manner

If you are a co-worker of someone returning to work after a leave of absence:

- Welcome your colleague back; support him or her and be friendly, warm, and respectful
- Respect the return-to-work plan; it sets clear expectations for your co-worker and perhaps even for the rest of your team as well
- Let people know when you feel their actions or words propagate stereotypes and myths; alternatively, discuss any concerns with your manager so he or she can address stigmatizing behaviors
- Ask and learn about the mental health policies and programs in your workplace

5. Removing stigma

Stigma has been identified as one of today's foremost obstacles to improved mental health care; it tragically deprives people of their dignity and interferes with their full participation in society. Stigma in relation to people with mental illness is often a combination of a lack of relevant knowledge (ignorance), attitudes (prejudice) and behavior (discrimination). Simply put, stigma refers to an attitude. The resultant discrimination is the behavior that exemplifies that attitude.

Unfortunately, stigma is a very real part of mental illness. Even though access to accurate information about mental illness increases each year through new research, training and various organizations whose mandate it is to educate the public, the shame attached to these disorders remains. And some mental illnesses seem to elicit more negative connotations than others.

What you can do to help remove stigma

- Educate yourself about mental health problems and learn the facts instead of the myths
- If your friends, family, co-workers or even the media make statements that are not true, let them know how their negative words and incorrect descriptions affect people with mental illness and only perpetuate stereotypes and myths
- Remember that the way we speak can affect the way other people think and speak; choose your words carefully and do not use hurtful or derogatory language
- People with mental illness can still make valuable contributions to society; let's recognize and applaud the positive, not the negative
- Treat people who have mental health problems with dignity and respect; support their choices and encourage their efforts to get well

Mental illness does not discriminate. It can affect anybody. However, by taking the time to learn the facts and educating others, you are already in a better position to support those who are suffering from a mental illness and reduce the stigma they are battling against.

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