**Minding Mendocino**

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**Introduction to Mindfulness**

With all the stress, uncertainties, and catastrophes around us; who among us is not stressed out? Simply turning on the news on a good day can create symptoms for many of us. And we do not have enough newspaper space to talk about the bad ones! Mindfulness is one of the tools many therapists are using to directly assist people who are struggling with stress, anxiety, depression, sleep issues, and many types of pain. So, what is mindfulness? This is a state of “being” that involves:

* Paying attention to the present
* On purpose
* Without any judgement

Sounds easy enough, though beginning can be much like working a muscle we have not ever used before. We can have mindful moments, no matter what we are doing. Our senses are often the key to these moments, as we pay attention to them. For example, when taking a walk are we experiencing what we see, hear, feel, smell, taste? Are we experiencing how our breath flows with the rhythm of our steps? If we are, then we are having a mindful moment! However, most of us are in a process of thinking so deeply that we forget to notice our environment with our senses. This state is coined by some mindfulness experts as “auto-pilot”.

The wonderful news is that all of us go into auto-pilot throughout the day. And, all of us can gently remind ourselves to have a mindful moment, any time we want to. It is free, and there are no strings attached. All we have to do is pay attention to one or all of our senses, our breath, or a bodily sensation. The second part is that we experience this sensation on purpose, and without any judgement. Any time we notice that we are in auto-pilot again, it is cause for celebration, not judgement. Because this is an opportunity to have another mindful second, or ten seconds, or even a minute or more! These can become the most blissful moments of our day, as they are spent accepting our present experience in the body. They are spent out of our often chaotic thought processes.

What we have been discussing so far would constitute an informal practice of mindfulness. Informal practice is simply those random times throughout the day that we remember to have “a moment”. These moments can happen in the shower, while eating part of a meal, taking a walk, petting an animal, and pretty much anything else you can imagine. Formal practice, on the other hand, takes a bit more discipline.

Formal practice of mindfulness involves setting aside a regular amount of time every day to sit or lie down and become aware of the breath, the body, and our experience in the moment. There are certain exercises that are common to a typical formal mindfulness practice, such as body scanning, breath awareness, yoga, and progressive muscle relaxation. While this sort of practice can be challenging to start, the benefits are countless.

One example of a benefit could be found by looking at physical or emotional pain. It is a natural defense for us to ignore or avoid the pain as much as possible. However, practicing mindfulness gives us a tool to acknowledge the pain, to accept it without judgement, and to expand our awareness around that pain. The pain could be physical pain, anxiety, depression, stress, or something else. The important part here is that once the pain is acknowledged and we gain awareness, we can breathe into it and consciously find more adaptive ways of carrying that pain. In some experiences, we may be able to reduce the discomfort or even eliminate the pain entirely.

The information and science behind mindfulness is sound and the practice has been proven to be effective for many people. Future articles may provide more info, if it seems helpful. For now Laytonville, just take a mindful breath. Fully experience the taste and sensation of your favorite food, feel the hot water on your skin, and stop and smell the roses. Guided body scan, progressive muscle relaxations, and breath awareness meditations can be found on the internet. Soundstrue.com has a comprehensive eight week mindfulness course that can be studied at home. A free eight week mindfulness class is available at: http://palousemindfulness.com/selfguidedMBSR\_week1.html

Stop by the clinic if you would like some mindfulness hand-outs! And remember, if you have a topic of interest feel free to write in to: Long Valley Health Center, PO Box 870, Laytonville, CA 95454 ATTN: Jessi Maness.