



QUESTION: What is mindfulness meditation?

REBECCA E. WELLS, MD: Mindfulness is paying attention in the present moment in a nonjudgmental way. And mindfulness is something that we all have the capacity for. We have an innate capacity for mindfulness. We were born with the ability to be mindful.

And then their brains have grown and developed, our frontal lobe developed, and we developed the capacity to think about the future and the past, sometimes it becomes more challenging to be able to focus on the present moment.

And so mindfulness meditation is an intentional strategy to build the capacity to practice mindfulness in our daily lives. And so mindfulness meditation is a practice where individuals are taught the skills to become more mindful in daily life.

Specifically the practice teaches individuals to focus on an object of attention, and usually that's the breath. And so to focus on the breath and that anchors the attention. And then as thoughts and feelings and sensations arise, to notice them but not become engaged by them. And calmly and gently and with compassion, returning the attention to the breath.

And so it's this ability to focus in on an object

of awareness like the breath, and calmly and gently not focus on the thoughts and the sensations and the feelings, that naturally will arise. Our minds are very active and it's not a question of if that will happen but when it happens.

And so having an attitude of compassion and also curiosity - what am I thinking about? But then bringing the attention back to the breath.

And so mindfulness is an intentional strategy that builds your capacity to access our ability that's innate to be able to pay attention in the present moment.

QUESTION: How can mindfulness meditation help patients with headache?

REBECCA E. WELLS, MD: Patients with headache often try different medication treatment options for relief. And many medications can be very helpful. However often medications are limited by side effects, or they don't always work. And so many patients are interested in trying other treatment modalities.

And headaches, especially headaches like migraine, are often affected by aspects of our lives that sometimes medications don't necessarily target or effect.

So for example, stress is the number one trigger for migraine. And anxiety often plays a role in migraines,

whether individuals have baseline anxiety, or if individuals just have anxiety about when their next migraine attack will happen.

And so mindfulness is a technique that can allow individuals to focus on the present moment and research has demonstrated that it can specifically decrease stress and anxiety. But it may actually decrease the likelihood of having headaches. And what's really unique about mindfulness is that by practicing mindfulness it's possible that individuals change their perception or their experience of pain.

So what's really fascinating with mindfulness, compared to a lot of other coping strategies, is that mindfulness teaches individuals to actually turn towards the pain. To look at it. To notice the sensation. To examine it. And not try to distract or turn away from it. And sometimes in turning towards the pain we can look at it and assess it and think about it and not become so emotionally engaged by it.

And so in a lot of ways, people who learn mindfulness, especially those with headache, can actually have their continue... they may continue to have headaches but they're able handle them better because they have a new strategy for being able to handle them.

Research looking at mindfulness meditation both as a prevention for having headaches, but many people often

also find that mindfulness may be helpful when they are acutely having a headache.

So there's a lot more research that needs to be done to understand the dose that's needed and who this treatment may be most helpful for. But what we're seeing so far with the evidence is that mindfulness meditation is a treatment modality that can be helpful for many patients with headaches.

QUESTION: How does mindfulness differ from relaxation?

REBECCA E. WELLS, MD: So mindfulness is an attentional strategy. So it is a focusing of the mind, not a clearing of the mind. Relaxation can happen in a variety of formats where individuals, somebody can be watching TV and that can be relaxing.

But mindfulness is a specific activity that engages the cognitive task of being able to focus on the present moment. And to be able to in thoughts and feeling and sensations devise letting them go and returning your attention to the present moment with an attitude of nonjudgment and curiosity.

And so it's important to recognize that although it can be relaxing and it can be calming, it is not only those things. It's also important to realize that sometimes when people begin practicing mindfulness they recognize how

stressed they are and how unmindful we are most of the time. And in some ways that can actually be stress inducing.

And so it's important to recognize that that sometimes can happen initially and be the opposite of relaxing. But then over time mindfulness can also create an ability to be able to respond to stress in an effective way in addition to potentially being a form of relaxation.

So while mindfulness can be relaxing, it isn't always relaxing, and that's not the goal of the practice. The goal of the practice is to build our innate capacity to bring mindfulness into our daily lives.

QUESTION: How does one practice mindfulness during a pandemic?

REBECCA E. WELLS, MD: During this pandemic we are all experiencing unprecedented levels of stress and anxiety and uncertainty, emotions like fear and grief and sadness, and for many of us this is something we've never experienced before.

And learning how to be able to handle all of the emotions, all of the thoughts that we're experiencing is very challenging. And I myself have found mindfulness to be really helpful during this time, not just as a way to cope, but as a way to change the way I'm relating to this

experience of the pandemic.

And it's something that I have recommended for my patients as well. Because we're all... It's ironic, we're all in this together, but we're all very isolated in many ways.

And mindfulness is a way that we can practice changing the way that we're thinking about this experience and changing the way that we can deal with it day to day.

So let me explain a little bit. Mindfulness is the concept of tuning into the emotions and thoughts that you're experiencing, noticing them, giving them space to exist - not trying to push them away or fight them off, but just noticing them. And then with kindness and compassion, returning your attention to the breath.

Because really in this pandemic we're all thinking about the what ifs and what about tomorrow and how am I going to handle this. There's so many levels of stress and uncertainty and anxiety, and yet all we have is the present moment. And being able to live in this present moment and pay attention to our present moment experience is so important and so powerful. And so it is something that I think is very important, very powerful during this time of the pandemic.

For all of my patients with headache, stress can often set off headaches and so practicing something that can allow us to tune into stress and tune into what we're experiencing is very important.

And what's unique about mindfulness is it gives us space to decide intentionally how we want to actually respond. And so when we're having thoughts or feelings or sensations and some of them are not pleasant, we don't have to push them away. We can invite them in and turn towards them and then look at them with an awareness and with kindness and then come back to the present moment.

Because we live in present moments. We live in the daily moment. And yet so often it's so easy to leave the present moment. But it's through living in the present moment that we can fully tune into our own experiences and make our decisions about how we're going to live our moments, moment by moment.