A Sampling of the Health Effects of Mindfulness Meditation

By Diane Handlin, PhD

One of the early breakthroughs in modern medicine came not as a result of a new medical discovery, but by putting in place a simple list of what a doctor needed to know in order to determine at intake a patient’s health. Initially, four items were on that list: 1) blood pressure, 2) pulse rate, 3) bodily temperature, and 4) respiratory rate. Anyone having even a routine checkup still has these things checked. At times a fifth item is measured; if a patient is experiencing pain, it is often measured on a scale of 1-10. All of these markers have been shown to be susceptible to improvement through mindfulness meditation.

Over the last 12 years of teaching mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) to hundreds of people, I have had some course participants using phone apps or other small devices measuring their blood pressure after a meditation practice and proudly reporting their positive results to the entire class. At times, the class members have greeted the news with enthusiastic applause. As far back as 1969, when Benson and Wallace published the first research study on the effects of meditation in Scientific American, the subjects in that study practiced Transcendental Meditation and the results, even then, revealed that meditation clearly lowered blood pressure.

In 1998, Jon Kabat-Zinn, the founder of MBSR who was a molecular biologist with a PhD from MIT made it his mission to bring the efficacy of meditative principles to western medicine. He first measured the effects mindfulness meditation (MBSR) on patients suffering from psoriasis. Those patients who were practicing mindfulness meditation (focusing on their breathing and bodily sensations) while undergoing treatment with the light-sensitizing drug psoralen and ultraviolet light (the latter two being used alone by the control group) had statistically faster skin clearing. This study set off an avalanche of studies exploring and validating the numerous health effects of mindfulness meditation practices. Another early study Kabat-Zinn undertook with Richie Davidson at the University of Wisconsin, which used MBS in a corporate setting with healthy, but stressed employees, showed activity in the prefrontal cortex which revealed that the meditators were handling anxiety and frustration better than the control group.
The meditation group also showed a stronger antibody response in their immune system when administered a flu shot and revealed a significant linear relationship between the amount of brain shift in a positive direction and the amount of antibody production. Currently, there have been over 100 studies of the positive health effects of mindfulness meditation at the National Institute of Health (NIH) alone.

Jon Kabat-Zinn was also passionately interested in MBSR’s broader potential for reducing stress and relieving pain. As a metaphor for living one’s life, he named his first book *Full Catastrophe Living* (revised with the latest research in 2013). He has often made the comment that his best definition of what mindfulness is can’t be expressed in a single sentence but is contained in the contents of the entire book. An essential underpinning of his work with pain reduction is that despite the inevitability of some pain in every human life, it is possible, with skill, to significantly ameliorate pain. MBSR is based on the premise that it is possible to develop a new relationship with ourselves so as not to have whatever pain we do experience cause us to contract into a small part of ourselves so that we become victimized by and defined by our pain. His work is based on the premise that “all human beings are miraculous beings and that as long as we are alive, there is more right with us than wrong with us.” For a much fuller and in depth exploration of the issue of mindfully working with pain, please be sure to read the excellent and clear material that Dr. Patricia Bloom has to offer in my e-newsletter interview with her “Chronic Pain is Everyone’s Business.”

Although the summary of all the research on the health benefits of mindfulness meditation is beyond the scope of an article for this newsletter, the research on the positive effects of meditation on the neuroplasticity of the brain has been well documented: [http://www.mindfulnessnj.com/docs/mindfulness8weeks.pdf](http://www.mindfulnessnj.com/docs/mindfulness8weeks.pdf). In addition, the numerous health benefits of mindfulness-based stress reduction have also been heralded: [http://mindfulnessnj.com/docs/helpforpatients.pdf](http://mindfulnessnj.com/docs/helpforpatients.pdf). More recently, the ability of MBSR to reduce inflammation has been documented. Finally, there has even been exciting research on mindfulness meditation’s potential for lengthening life through studying its impact on telomeres at the end of chromosomes. It has been documented that perceived stress and chronic stress can influence telomere length which has been shown to be correlated with health and longevity: [https://mosaicscience.com/story/can-meditation-really-slow-ageing](https://mosaicscience.com/story/can-meditation-really-slow-ageing) To find more information on recent research, as well as selected articles, videos and books, please visit: [http://mindfulnessnj.com/readings.htm](http://mindfulnessnj.com/readings.htm) at [www.mindfulnessnj.com](http://www.mindfulnessnj.com) or read Jon Kabat-Zinn’s seminal book, *Full Catastrophe Living* (rev. 2013).

**Diane Handlin, PhD** is a licensed psychologist with a practice in Metuchen, NJ. She specializes in life transitions or what many people experience as blocks or challenges in their lives. She is also founder and executive director of the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction Center of NJ, and is certified by the Center for Mindfulness at UMass Medical School. Dr. Handlin has consulted and presented in many different venues and has been published in and/or interviewed for: *Sex Roles, New Ideas in Psychology,*