

The Mainstreaming Of Mindfulness

Stressed-out Americans from war veterans to Google workers are embracing meditation. Does it really work?
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Why Is Mindfulness So Popular?

It appeals to people seeking an antidote to life in work-obsessed, tech-saturated, frantically busy Western culture. There is growing scientific evidence that mindfulness meditation has genuine health benefits—and can even alter the structure of the brain, so the technique is drawing some unlikely devotees. Pentagon leaders are experimenting with mindfulness to make soldiers more resilient, while General Mills has installed a meditation room in every building of its Minneapolis campus. Even tech-obsessed Silicon Valley entrepreneurs are using it as a way to unplug from their hyper-connected lives. “Meditation always had bad branding for this culture,” says Evan Williams, co-founder of Twitter. “But to me, it’s a way to think more clearly and to not feel so swept up.”

What Is Mindfulness, Exactly?

It’s a meditation practice central to the Buddha’s teachings, which has now been adapted by Western teachers into a secular self-help technique. One of the pioneers in the field is Jon Kabat-Zinn, an MIT-educated molecular biologist who began teaching mindfulness in the 1970s to people suffering from chronic pain and disease. The core of mindfulness is quieting the mind’s constant chattering- thoughts, anxieties, and regrets. Practitioners are taught to keep their attention focused on whatever they’re doing at the present moment, whether it’s eating, exercising, or even working. The most basic mindfulness practice is sitting meditation: You sit in a comfortable position, close your eyes, and focus your awareness on your breath and other bodily sensations. When thoughts come, you gently let them go without judgment and return to the focus on the breath. Over time, this practice helps people connect with a deeper, calmer part of themselves, and retrain their brains not to get stuck in pointless, neurotic ruminations about the past and future that leave them constantly stressed, anxious, or depressed.

Does It Work?

Scientific research has shown that mindfulness appears to make people both happier and healthier. Regular meditation can lower a person’s blood pressure and their levels of cortisol, a stress hormone produced by the adrenal gland and closely associated with anxiety. Meditation can also increase the body’s immune response, improve a person’s emotional stability and sleep quality, and even enhance creativity. When combining mindfulness with traditional forms of cognitive behavioral therapy, patients in one study saw a 10 to 20 percent improvement in the mild symptoms of their depression—the same progress produced by antidepressants. Other studies have found that up to 80 percent of trauma survivors and veterans with PTSD see a significant reduction in troubling symptoms. Walter Reed National Military Medical Center is also teaching mindfulness as a form of treatment for patients with substance abuse problems.

Why Does It Work?

MRI scans have shown that mindfulness can alter meditators’ brain waves—and even cause lasting changes to the physical structure of their brains (see *Rewiring* below). Meditation reduces electrical activity and blood flow in the amygdala, a brain structure involved in strong, primal emotions such as fear and anxiety, while boosting activity regions responsible for decision-making, and empathy. These findings have helped attract the more skeptical-minded. “There is a swath of our culture who is not going to listen to someone in monk’s robes,” says Richard J. Davidson, founder of the Center for Investigating Healthy Minds, “but they are paying attention to scientific evidence.”

Who Are These Converted Skeptics?

Ironically enough, Silicon Valley’s tech geeks are leading the way. “It seems counterintuitive, since technology is perhaps the biggest driver of mindlessness and distraction,” says Ann Mack, a director at marketing communications brand JWT Worldwide. Google now has an in-house mindfulness program

called “Search Inside Yourself,” and the company has even installed a labyrinth at its Mountain View complex so employees can practice walking meditation. Tech leaders flock annually to the Wisdom 2.0 conference, and there are now countless smartphone apps devoted to the subject. But these developments have led to a growing concern that mindfulness is being co-opted and corrupted.

Why Is That?

Long-term adherents of mindfulness worry that what is fundamentally a spiritual practice is being appropriated by new age entrepreneurs seeking to profit off it. Others are concerned that Fortune 500 executives are pushing meditation so that overworked employees can be even more productive without melting down. But Westerners clearly need some sort of strategy to cope with a world now filled with the inescapable distractions of technology. The average American now consumes 63 gigabytes of content, or more than 150,000 words, over 13.6 hours of media use every single day - and all indications are that those numbers will keep climbing. For Janice Marturano, founder of the Institute for Mindful Leadership, mindfulness is not just a way of coping with the deluge of input; it’s a way of confronting the modern world head-on. “There is no life- work balance,” says Marturano. “We have one life. What’s most important is that you be awake for it.”

Rewiring The Brain

Until recently, neurologists believed that a person's brain stopped physically developing when they were 25 to 35 years old. From that point onward, the hardware was set. But a growing body of research points to the possibility of lifelong "neuroplasticity"—the ability of the brain to adapt to new input—and a 2011 Massachusetts General Hospital study found that those who meditate regularly for as little as eight weeks changed the very structure of their brains. MRI scans showed that by meditating daily for an average of 27 minutes, participants increased the density of the gray matter (which holds most of our brain cells) in an area that is essential for focus, memory, and compassion. Previous research had already shown that monks who had spent more than 10,000 hours in meditation had extraordinary growth and activity in this part of the brain. But it's now clear that even relative beginners at mindfulness can quickly rewire their brains in a positive way.