

Undoing Depression: What Therapy Doesn't Teach You And Medication Can't Give You

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Mindfulness

Mindfulness is certainly not an original idea from me; in fact, I'm still learning to apply its principles and techniques with my patients and with myself. So let me give you a little background: about twenty-five years ago, Jon Kabat-Zinn and some colleagues began to investigate the effects of meditation on the mind and the body. They eventually developed an eight-week stress reduction and relaxation program (now generally called Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction; MBSR). Because they were working at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, they had to design their research to meet the tough standards of academic rigor. That's why it really drew attention when they were able to demonstrate that meditation significantly helped conditions as diverse as major depression, chronic pain, anxiety and panic, bulimia, psoriasis, fibromyalgia, mixed neurosis, mood and stress symptoms in cancer patients, and stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms in the general population. Later studies showed that if "normal" people practiced MBSR, they "experienced the kinds of brain changes that are associated with positive moods, and their immune systems were strengthened. I would like to point out here that if a patentable drug were showing such results, the drug company owning the patent would soon become the richest in the land, and we would be seeing at least three television commercials per night touting its benefits. But because mindfulness seems so simple, yet at the same time requires self-discipline, it's not going to generate such heat. Nevertheless, it is catching on, in its own quiet way. A new psychotherapeutic approach to depression, called Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy for Depression, is showing great promise. I discuss that further in Chapter 14.

Mindful meditation practice has been shown to affect how the brain deals with emotions, especially in the prefrontal cortex (PFC), which many brain scientists consider the actual physical location of our self-awareness. Meditation practice results in an increase in activity in that prefrontal area, where the brain processes positive feelings and controls negative feelings, an effect that lasts even when we're not meditating. This area of the brain contains a set of neurons that control messages of fear and anger from the amygdala, the fear center. It seems that the more we practice this effect, the easier it gets; we learn to control disturbing emotions just as we learn to ride a bike; after a while we don't have to think about it, it just happens.

Buddhist monks, who practice meditation for hours daily, have been found to be the happiest people in the world, by some measures. Richard Davidson has been studying the relative activity of the left and right lobes of the prefrontal cortex, and has found that, among the people he's tested all over the world, more activity on the right is associated with unpleasant or depressed moods, while more activity on the left means happiness and enthusiasm. People who consistently have greater activity on the left typically have fewer troubling moods and recover rapidly when they do. When Davidson tested an advanced Buddhist monk, he found that he had the greatest difference between left and right lobe activity of anyone yet tested. This observation has been repeated with other monks. While we may not wish to completely detach ourselves from the world and meditate for hours a day, we may want to get that left prefrontal cortex more activated through some regular meditation practice. Generally, it's been found that the more you meditate, the more the left lobe becomes active, while the right lobe slows down.

Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction is an intense, but brief, program. Mindfulness, however, is a way of life. Kabat-Zinn described the mindful state as "paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally."

To me, mindfulness means deliberately trying to attain a new attitude toward your thoughts, feelings, and everyday experience - an attitude of openness, compassion, and objectivity; a deliberate effort not to be guided by old habits of thinking and behaving but to see each experience in its uniqueness"? It means seeing yourself without illusions but with love.

If mindfulness isn't clear to you yet, consider that you're very well acquainted with its opposite. Mindlessness - the hurried, hyper-vigilant frame of mind that has us always rushing to cross to-dos off our lists, so pressured that we're not able to listen or concentrate or really evaluate new information. Instead, we quickly put it into one of our prefab stereotypes: good, bad, boring, a new emergency, or I'll think about it later (meaning I'll forget about it until I wake up at 4 A.M. with a whole list of worries I've repressed). Mindfulness means being in the present moment, but slightly detached. It means fully absorbing your thoughts, feelings, and experiences without being swept away by them.

Mindfulness also means learning to watch your mind at work, looking at yourself with compassionate curiosity. Compassion, like a close friend, suffers with us a little but also sees the patterns that we're normally too close to see. Curiosity shows us that there's really nothing to be afraid of in our own heads, but a lot we could learn. We can then turn that same viewpoint on the world. Practice makes us more observant and deliberate; we become more thoughtful about reacting to emotions and impulses; more curious, ready to look beneath the surface, not so hasty about jumping to conclusions; kinder, more patient, more tolerant of others and ourselves. One of the key elements in mindfulness is detaching a little from thoughts, worries, and impulses; not taking immediate action but expecting that if you take a step back, think, and look inside yourself, you'll probably make a wiser decision.

Regular meditation practice is the best way to achieve a mindful state, and it's been shown to have marvelous effects on mood, stress level, and health. If this looks intriguing or possible to you, I urge you to give it an honest try, at least five days a week for two weeks. If you can do that much, you will probably start to feel some benefits —more calmness, more objectivity, more open-mindedness. But I have to warn that mindfulness meditation probably shouldn't be attempted by the most depressed, those who are paralyzed or just exhausted getting through the day, or so overwhelmingly sad that they can't escape their feelings. For these particular people, meditation will seem like a huge burden with no immediate payoff, and may only lead you to focus on your misery. Still, most depressed people are likely to feel that meditation practice is too much of a burden, and I again urge you to try. If you can just make yourself sit down and do the first five minutes, you can probably do another fifteen, enough for one day. Remember that your depression is largely a response to the stress that you are under, not a weakness you're to blame for, not an illness that can only be cured with medication. Mindfulness practice is the best cure for stress.

Here's a basic routine for meditation that many have found helpful:

Exercise 3: A Simple Mindfulness Meditation

- *Find a quiet place where you will not be interrupted for a half hour or more. Turn off the phones, the TV, the stereo. If you have pets, make sure they won't distract you. I find it helpful to turn on a fan, both for the cooling effect and for the quiet noise.*

- *Try to meditate at roughly the same time every day, but don't do it when you're overtired or overstressed or have just eaten a big meal. One of the best ways to achieve lasting health and happiness is to give yourself an hour every day devoted to exercise and meditation. I very much enjoy meditation while I am cooling down from exercise.*

- *Sit in a comfortable position. If you want to sit on the floor in a yoga position, it helps to have a thin pillow under you. Tuck your feet under your knees, but don't strain. Sit upright, with your back straight. Let the weight of your head fall directly on your spinal column. If you want to sit in a chair, try to put your feet flat on the floor, hands in your lap or at your sides. Again, sit upright, with your back straight. Posture is important, because it helps to keep you from falling asleep.*

- *Close your eyes, and start to breathe slowly and deeply. Not so deeply that you strain yourself} just comfortable. As you breathe, you may find it helpful to focus on a word or phrase, tinting it to your breathing. "In. . . Out." You can change this to suit your mood. When I'm fighting cravings, I think, "Wave. . . Rock. " The waves of desire are very powerful but the rock remains. Other times I like "I am here ... I am home. " You will find phrases that have meaning for you.*

- *Focus on your breathing. As other thoughts or feelings come to mind, let them pass, and return your*

attention to your breathing. Visualize these distracting thoughts and feelings as bubbles rising to the surface of a calm pool of water. They rise and burst, the ripples spread out and disappear: The pool remains calm. Return your attention to your breathing.

- *Don't judge. Don't worry about doing this right, just try to do it every day. Remember that the distracting thoughts and feelings are the normal noise in your brain. It takes practice and skill to get in touch with the quietness underneath. Every time I practice, I have to spend the first few minutes clearing my head of thoughts about what I'm going to do as soon as I finish; I've been so conditioned to be "productive," to keep myself busy.*

- *When I'm preparing for meditation, and when I feel restless, I like to remember the perspective of a Buddhist nun in a workshop I attended: "If you have a fussy baby, do you shout at the baby? Do you get angry at it? Do you shake it? No--you build a cradle for the baby." That's what we have to deliberately allow ourselves to practice: to treat ourselves with care and concern. That's also what meditation does for our restless, anxious minds; it builds a structure we can feel safe in.*

- *Return your attention to your breath.*

- *You will find yourself frequently distracted by intrusive thoughts—sometimes nagging thoughts about chores you have to do, sometimes memories that may be pleasant or unpleasant. You may also be distracted by emotions—primarily impatience and anxiety. Remember that these intrusive thoughts and emotions are the normal noise your brain makes because it's so used to functioning under stress. Even the most adept meditators can still get hijacked this way. It may help to visualize, for instance, putting these thoughts into a box or on a list that you can look at later. Or simply say to yourself, "No thank you." Don't get upset with yourself because you do get distracted; don't tell yourself you're not doing it right, simply return to the focus on your breath. Judging yourself is another habit, one you can put aside while you're meditating.*

- *Return your attention to your breath.*

- *If you get distracted, or get upset, try to cultivate the attitude of compassionate curiosity. Approach your frustration with an attitude of openness, of understanding, of friendly interest. "I wonder what could be going on here?" rather than "I can't do this right."*

- *When you are ready to stop, open your eyes. Stay seated for a few moments while you appreciate the calm state you are in.*

- *If you have to use an alarm, make it something quiet, not jarring. Some guided meditation CDs includes a section with nothing on it but temple bells at regular intervals. Or you can program the timer on your cell phone or PDA to alert you with a gentle sound.*

People often expect meditation to lead them to brilliant insights, to higher levels of consciousness, to a state of near-perfect bliss. That's not the purpose of this kind of meditation; this is more like a training program for your brain. When I do this exercise in workshops, I routinely ask for a show of hands of how many people began to experience intrusive thoughts. This is boring. My back hurts. I have to stop and get milk on the way home. I must not be doing this right. Meditation isn't for me. Everyone in the workshop has thoughts like these. This is the voice of your judging mind, your Inner Critic. The voice is a product of stress, of the need we feel to classify our experiences quickly into simple categories without experiencing them too deeply. If you're depressed, that voice is usually turned on yourself. Instead of acting on these judgments, just notice how your brain is always judging. Judging is your frontal lobe, the "higher" mental center, trying desperately to hold on to control, while your focus on the breath is uncoupling it. One of the chief principles of mindfulness is to learn to suspend judging, because it leads to categorical, rigid, mindless thinking. But don't judge yourself for judging; it's a hard habit to break. Just notice it, and try to let it go. Try to be amused by it. There I go again, like a doorman at a fancy club; you're in, you're out. My poor frontal lobe must be really scared at the idea of losing control. You may notice that, live minutes after you have one thought, you'll have another that directly 'contradicts the first; yet both, at the time, feel equally true and equally urgent. So this judging is not a rational process at all, though it pretends to be.

Sometimes when I meditate. I think of the little pond in my backyard. It's a very peaceful scene with a small fountain, water lilies and frogs, and lots of sunlight. When I start thinking about ways to improve the

pond, I know I'm having trouble focusing. Get a better filtration system, fix the stones around the edge so they stop falling in, and change the plantings. That's the problem-solving mode our minds have been trained to be in—even to the extent of creating problems when there are none. My pond is fine as it is, but my caveman mind is always striving. My insecure mind is always trying to make things better. My consumer mind is always looking for something new. Sometimes just being still is a very difficult thing.

Admittedly, learning to be mindful with or without meditation is not easy. If we were raised in a safe and secure home, this is a skill that comes naturally to us as children, but we tend to lose it as we settle into adulthood. Regaining it requires effort. First of all, you're not likely to take it seriously, because it sounds so simple that it's easy to dismiss. And in the midst of depression, feeling overwhelmed with everything in your life, who's ready to try anything that adds another half hour to the day? Remember the AA saying, "Just because it's simple doesn't mean it's easy." Try to remember that three months of daily juggling practice results in restructuring the brain. So don't give up after a week or two, feeling that you're "no good" at this. That's the depression talking. If you've given it two weeks, you've already begun to make some changes in your brain; you won't lose them if you get discouraged and skip a day or so. Just climb back on the horse.

Steven Hayes, the architect of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, makes a fascinating point. We have marvelous minds that are very good at solving problems, but many of our biggest problems can't be solved—hurt, pain, loss, disappointment, rejection, illness, fear, anger, and jealousy, to name a few. When we expect our marvelous minds to solve these problems, we make matters worse for ourselves because we get frustrated. Then we feel inadequate, blame ourselves, and question our competence.

Try a thought experiment: Say you're feeling sad. Try not to feel that way. Try as hard as you can. Make yourself happy instead. As soon as you hear that, you know it's nonsensical; no one can control their emotions that way. Still, chances are you try it all the time, somewhere under the level of total awareness. After all, it seems logical enough; we have such magnificent brains we ought to be able to control a simple thing like a sad mood. But it's like the "don't think of a pink elephant" command. Ironically, the more we try to suppress a thought, feeling, or image, the more it keeps popping up in our minds. So you'll be constantly reminded of your sad feelings, which will make you sadder. You'll also feel inadequate and incompetent, because you can't do a simple thing like get out of your sad mood. Instead of directly trying to control our feelings, instead of defending against them, denying, projecting, rationalizing, we have to do something different.

Depressed people, for instance, are naturally enough going to believe that thinking intensely about their problems will lead to solutions. But when thinking turns into rumination, it just perpetuates the feeling state of depression; so they feel worse, more immobilized and helpless. Most of us think, at times: What's wrong with me? Other people don't seem to worry like I do. Other people seem to be in control of their lives. Of course, we don't see all the misery they carry with them. We're trying to solve all the problems associated with merely being human, and we can't. We expect ourselves to master a world we simply weren't designed for a world where we're always in fight-or-flight mode, and we can't do that either. But we feel like we can't give up.

This is the big news coming from brain research. We literally can't change ourselves by thinking our way out. It's true that we have to use our thought processes to understand our situation, and understanding can lead to new perspectives, and new solutions—but the solutions have to be put into action. Once you're sealed up in the tuna fish can with your worries and sadness and pessimism, you can't get out unless you somehow acquire a can opener. Practicing mindfulness is the can opener.

Detachment

The depressed person makes himself miserable partly by trying to control things he can't control. Indeed, some researchers feel that excessive worrying is the hallmark of depression. Depressives ruminate on their problems, chewing over the same issues endlessly; we find a counterargument for every possible solution to our problems, and so end up taking no action at all. This ruminative thinking style is a distinctive characteristic of depression; some feel that women are more prone to this kind of thinking,

whereas men are more likely to take action, and that partially accounts for why women are more vulnerable to depression (and why so many more men are in jail).

Julia is a patient who has benefited from detachment. She and her husband both come from highly dysfunctional families: they've been together twenty years, ever since college, and have built a good life for themselves and their two children. The fly in the ointment is her husband's drinking. He doesn't drink much in terms of quantity, but it seems to hit him sometimes very quickly, so that he seems dangerously drunk: confused, slurring words, losing the thread of the conversation. Julia sometimes wonders if he's been secretly drinking. But equally often, she has seen him have three drinks over the course of an evening and seem unfazed.

Julia and her husband have talked a lot about this over the years. He agrees he needs to be careful about alcohol, but doesn't want to give it up. Julia worries a lot, when he's away on business trips, or when he's had a drink with his coworkers before driving home. She knows she's a ruminator, examining every encounter from every angle, which sometimes just leaves her more confused. But she has realized that her efforts to police her husband backfire; he resents her scrutiny and sometimes will open a beer at home as if he's looking for a fight (he often doesn't finish the beer). Now he and Julia have reached a compromise: if he will just be honest with her about when he has a drink, she will not come down on him for it, unless it's clearly bad judgment. I suspect that this is not the end of the problem, but it's helping right now to maintain what in many ways is an excellent relationship.

Julia could never have done this without having practiced mindfulness and detachment. She started practicing with her pre-teen children. She has seen that her refusal to get involved in their squabbles means they blow over more quickly. She's established firm boundaries about what constitutes acceptable behavior at home, and the children largely respect that. When they don't, Julia calmly and firmly enforces the consequences. Now she's trying a version of the same thing with her husband. It won't be easy for her to give up obsessing about him, but it's within her abilities now.

Detachment is a skyhook we desperately need, the ability to rise above the noise in our heads and see the big picture. Detachment suggests a certain degree of insulation from contagious emotions—not being caught up in others' panic or anger, but making our own decisions about the emotional meaning of a situation. It means recognizing that crisis situations eventually get resolved, that even feelings like panic dissipate, and that what we can do about the situation and other people's feelings is limited.

Detachment implies an ascetic discipline, an Eastern value system differing greatly from a Western, consumer-oriented society in which the one who dies with the most toys wins. Now that we know for certain that materialism means greater unhappiness, perhaps it's time for us all to work on changing our values. Detachment sometimes means giving up—an insulting concept for many Americans, but one that we should consider more often. A strategic retreat from an impossible task is simply wise, not shameful. We can all see the wisdom of the dying man, retiring from the daily struggles of life to spend more time with his family. But we are all dying, just some of us faster than others. We have to accept reality, to play the cards we are dealt.

It seems as if depressives have an obsessive quality that won't let us detach. We often worry constantly about things over which we have no control, or tell ourselves we won't be happy unless something we can't control happens. A woman I know has two gay children. She feels she has accepted their homosexuality, but she is terribly upset about their decision not to have children. She can't be with people her age because they talk about grandchildren so much. This is very sad, but sadder still is that she sees no way out. She feels the rest of her life will be miserable because of this.

Two questions can help gain a realistic detachment: Will this really matter tomorrow (next week, next month)? and, What can I realistically do about it? If I'm in a situation that is highly charged emotionally but whose outcome is not really crucial to me, perhaps I don't have to act impulsively just to get some emotional relief. If I'm in a difficult, even an important, situation but my options are limited I only make myself miserable by wishing for the impossible.

Learning to manage stress really means managing the anger and anxiety we feel in stressful situations.

Only when these emotional byproducts of stress are under control is it possible to think about facing the situation creatively.

When I was a brand-new therapist I had a client pull a knife on himself. He was trying to get me to call his girlfriend to ask her to come back to him, to say in effect that it was my professional opinion that he couldn't get along without her. When I refused, he calmly opened a huge knife, counted down his ribs to his heart, and pressed the point against his chest. "I don't think you realize how serious I am," he said.

This was a moment of pure anxiety for me. I hadn't the vaguest idea what to do. I knew I would just be an agent of his manipulation if I called the girlfriend, but how could I let him stab himself? I remembered some advice one of my casework instructors had given our class: "When you are completely stuck, get up and go to the bathroom." I got up and left the room, saying I had to get some advice. I went down the hall and told a colleague what was going on. Then our boss walked by, and I repeated the story. My anxiety was catching, and after ten minutes or so of discussion the three of us eventually decided I would have to call the girlfriend. But when I went back to tell my client, he was gone. Of course he must have begun to feel foolish holding a knife to himself in an empty room. He called me later in the day, furious at me for walking out on him, but that was okay with me.

I got lucky. In pure panic, I remembered a mentor's advice, and it turned out to work better than I had a right to expect. I detached myself, quite literally, from the power struggle this client was trying to create. We need to learn to detach ourselves from our own interior power struggles. When we're caught up in our emotions, when we feel on the spot, pressured to come up with the vital solution that seems out of reach, our ability to think is just about absent. Our bodies are full of fight-or-flight hormones, which are good for fleeing from saber-toothed cats. But they don't help—in fact, they absolutely hinder—creative problem-solving. We can't come up with new solutions, we can only think of what is instinctual or what we've done before in similar situations. Whatever we do, it is just more of the same stuff that hasn't worked before.

Stuck in a stressful situation, you have only three choices: you can alter it, you can avoid it, or you can accept it. Each of these may be the best solution for a particular situation; none of them is inherently any better than the other. Western culture values action—we admire people who take action to alter their predicaments—and so you might assume that altering the situation is always best. Avoidance sounds shameful and acceptance sounds passive. But there are many things in life we can't alter and others that are not worth the trouble; wisdom has to do with knowing what's worth fighting about. Caught in the road with an eighteen-wheeler bearing down on you, you don't fight about the right of way, you avoid getting run over. We practice avoidance like this all the time but don't acknowledge it. And acceptance means just facing reality. With the stress of an illness, for example, there is no avoiding it and no one to fight about it with, though many people fire their doctors for giving them bad news. The point is to review your options and make a conscious decision; don't beat yourself up if you can't change an unalterable situation. Don't vacillate between half-hearted attempts to change it and trying to accept it. Think about it: alter, avoid, accept.

It should not come as a surprise to the reader at this point that I suggest we need to understand our thought processes from a different perspective than the one we take for granted. A more mindful approach to thinking is called for. When we observe ourselves mindfully over the course of time, we see how our thoughts are constantly changing. What seemed like a huge issue yesterday has somehow gone away today; the terrible importance that we attached to addressing this problem has become detached, and the problem assumes its proper proportions. Observing ourselves mindfully, we become used to the idea of thoughts as mental events, things that are happening inside our brains. We stop thinking of our thoughts as the absolute truth or as moral imperatives that we must act on immediately. We see how our thoughts are influenced by feelings, the stress of the day, the weather, the background music, how much coffee we've had, how much Zoloft is in our systems, and we trust them less. That doesn't mean that we dismiss our own thoughts, or become so laid back and detached that we don't care about anything, or that we can never make up our minds because we can always see all sides of an issue. We may trust our thoughts less, but they are still vital information to us.

We can go on and practice thinking mindfully. We can consider the evidence of our thoughts and

feelings together, and make our decisions accordingly. We can recognize the impact of stress in the pressure to make quick decisions, and we can practice patience, waiting until we're as certain as we want to be. Then we can observe carefully the impact of our decisions.