Can Practicing Mindfulness Help Depression?

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Mindfulness and Depression

The practice of mindfulness and meditation has been proven to be an effective way to manage the cognitive symptoms of depression. This is a method that can be used by anyone, so long as you are willing to put in the work to learn how it is done.

What is Mindfulness?

Mindfulness can be described as being in the present moment, with the intention or purpose and without judgment. By paying full attention to the present moment, mindfulness eases some of the cognitive symptoms common in depression.

Focusing on what is happening in the here and now can help you become more aware of negative thoughts, acknowledging their presence while coming to the realization that they do not accurately reflect reality. Mindfulness helps us to see that our thoughts are less powerful than we once believed.

Some have described mindfulness as watching ourselves think, as if watching the tide come and go. We may experience thoughts but do not get carried away by them.

Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy

Mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT) combines mindfulness principles with more traditional cognitive therapy to help prevent relapse in depression. MBCT can help you detach from distorted and negative thinking patterns, preventing triggers that lead to depression.

MBCT is based on mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR), which is a program that was developed by Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn. MBSR incorporates mindfulness tools like meditation, body scans and hatha yoga, combined with education on stress and assertiveness.

What Are the Cognitive Symptoms of Depression?

Mindfulness has been proven to ease the cognitive symptoms of depression, but what exactly are these symptoms? Distorted thinking, difficulty concentrating and forgetfulness are among the most common cognitive symptoms.

These symptoms can easily impair all areas of your life, so learning how to gain more control over these thinking patterns can be extremely beneficial to your overall mental health. As negative thoughts can lead to negative emotions, by preventing their hold over you, mindfulness can prevent the deepening of depression.

How to be Mindful

At its most basic, mindfulness is really just about taking a few moments to focus on yourself and your own experience. You learn to pay close attention to what is presently happening to you, in the moment.

In order to be mindful, you must train your brain to focus on the here and now. To do so, most people focus on their physical sensations, including sight, taste, smell and touch.

By anchoring your thoughts to physical sensations, you can focus on the moment, fully appreciating what is going on right now, rather than dwelling on the past or the future. It is being aware of your body and experiencing it fully.

There are no judgments on what sensations are good or bad during mindfulness practice — they just are. You simply have to notice what is happening inside your body and your mind, as well as what is happening around you.

By avoiding labels or judging what is happening, you learn to simply observe. Look at your life with a bit of distance, rather than emotionally reacting to everything you experience.

In a busy world full of multi-tasking, mindfulness teaches just the opposite. Focus on doing just one thing at a time, giving that activity your full and undivided attention.

Daily Mindfulness Practice

You can begin practicing mindfulness right now, as it can be done at any point during your day and can be easily incorporated into other activities. Mindfulness can be explored while eating, washing the dishes, vacuuming, showering, or walking the dog.

In order to begin a daily mindfulness practice, try incorporating it into at least one or two activities every day.

While brushing your teeth, try slowing down your pace and focus on what it feels like, how it tastes and what smells you experience. Avoid distractions by turning off the television and pausing any music that you can hear.

Avoid labeling the sensations that you experience as you practice mindfulness. The pain in your gums as you floss your teeth is not bad, it just is.

Notice each sensation as it presents itself, fully experience it and then let it go. The key is to avoid hanging onto any particular physical sensation by simply allowing them to pass through.

If your mind begins to wander, simply recognize this and then bring yourself back to the present moment. It is normal and natural for the mind to wander, so there is no need to get upset over losing focus.

The easiest way to return to the present is to return to your breath. This is a physical sensation that is with you all the time and works well as an anchor for your mindfulness practice.

From Mindfulness to Meditation

Mindfulness can be practiced anywhere and at any time. The more you practice, the easier it becomes to remain within the present moment – without excessive wandering – and focus on your physical sensations.

Once you become more comfortable with mindfulness practice, you can begin to explore the benefits of meditation. You can begin practicing meditation nearly anywhere to begin reaping the benefits of inner peace and balance.

Just like mindfulness, meditation can be practiced by anyone. It is simple, costs no money, and requires no equipment.

Guided Meditation

When first exploring meditation, guided meditation is a great way to begin. This is led by a teacher who will guide you through the meditation process.

Also known as guided imagery or visualization, this form of meditation teaches you to form mental images of places or situations you will find relaxing. You will also use an assortment of senses, including smells, sights, sounds and textures.

Guided meditation is a bit easier for beginners, as you are led by a teacher who will help you remain focus throughout the process. This will help teach you to be present in the moment, how to focus on your bodily sensations and what to do if your mind wanders.

Be Gentle With Yourself

Remember that everyone has to begin somewhere, even when it comes to meditation and mindfulness. If you get off to a rough start (with your mind wandering every few seconds), simply remember that losing focus is completely natural.

By practicing mindfulness regularly, you will be able to lengthen the amount of time that you can go without losing focus, remaining within the present moment. The less time spent in the past and the future, the more time you can appreciate what is happening here and now.