Mindfulness

What is mindfulness?

Mindfulness can be defined as: paying un-distractible attention to the present moment, or “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally.” (John Kabat-Zinn, 1994)

Mindfulness is paying attention with flexibility, openness, and curiosity. It is an awareness process and not a thinking process. Mindfulness is about being able to consciously direct, broaden, or focus on different aspects of your experience. You can learn to direct your attention to the “here and now,” while simultaneously loosening your attention on what your mind is offering. Paying attention in this moment to what you notice, what you hear, what you sense, and allowing yourself to make values-based decisions based on your experience rather than your thoughts. This process allows you to experience the reality of each moment rather than living according to the past and future oriented mind.

Mindfulness interventions are gaining in popularity and are offered by most of the major health systems in the area. Research on mindfulness shows that it is helpful for depression, relapse prevention, anxiety, substance abuse, eating disorders and binge eating, insomnia, chronic pain, psoriasis, type 2 diabetes, fibromyalgia, rheumatoid arthritis, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, HIV, cancer, and heart disease.

Signs that mindfulness may be
helpful in your life:

* You find yourself breaking things, spilling things, clumsiness, and accidents because of
carelessness, inattention or thinking about something else.
* Failing to notice subtle or not-so-subtle feelings of physical discomfort, pain, tension etc.
* Forgetting someone’s name as soon as you hear it.
* Listening to someone with one ear while doing something else at the same time.
* Getting so focused on goals that I lose touch with what I am doing right now.
* Getting lost in my thoughts and feelings.
* Being preoccupied with the future or the past.
* Eating without being aware of eating.
* Having periods of time where you have difficulty remembering the details of what
happened – running on autopilot.
* Reacting emotionally in certain ways – feeling like an emotion just “came out of nowhere.”
* Daydreaming or thinking of other things when doing chores.
* Doing several things at once rather than focusing on one thing at a time.
* Distracting yourself with things like eating, alcohol, shopping, drugs, work

Why is mindfulness important in terms of wellness, healing, and overall health?

* Prevents living on auto pilot
* Increases the richness of your life
* Reduces stress and increases clarity
* Separates you from the “chatter” in your mind and allows you to make healthy, clear,
and value-based decisions
* Allows us to truly be present to experience our lives
* Reminds us that we have the power to choose in the moment despite what our mind says
* Our mind might try to talk us into making poor choices but we can be aware of it when it
happens and acknowledge that it is just a thought without power unless we listen to it
* Although we can’t stop our mind from bringing up painful memories or telling us scary stories
about the future, we can learn to let those thoughts come and go instead of latching on to them
* This allows us the freedom to make choices we feel good about in the moment, rather than choosing mindlessly with regret

The Importance of Practice

Mindfulness takes consistent practice and gentle self-support. Each time you practice try to gently remind yourself to come back to the present moment when you notice your mind has distracted you. Our minds are designed to problem solve, plan, and chatter. When they attempt to “hook” us during practice, they are merely doing their job. Our job then is to practice guiding our attention where it serves us the most rather than simply following what our mind suggests.

Many times what our mind is offering is not based in reality and it does not serve us to listen. Through the ongoing practice of mindfulness, we are given a choice in the moment to observe what the mind is offering and decide whether or not it is helpful to listen. Practice, patience, and self-kindness are key!