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How Mindfulness Fights Anxiety And Depression

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In personal life and professional practice, I have listened to people's regrets about the past, and worries about what is to come. We have all at some point in our lives been kept awake at night in anticipation of things to come, or in sad reflection about how we have failed throughout the day behind us. The results are exhaustion and missed opportunity to appreciate the moment before us.

Although it seems a simple enough task, many of us struggle to keep our thoughts focused on the here and now, and the inability to do so contributes to anxiety and low mood. Mindfulness keeps us focused on the present, and helps us meet challenges head on while we appreciate all our senses absorb. On the contrary, focus on the future contributes to anxiety, while perseveration on the past feeds depression. Far too often when we look to the future, we ask ourselves, "What if," and the answer we give ourselves is often a prediction of a negative result.

We will never encounter a future task made avoidable by fixating on it days in advance. On the contrary, not only does the focus of our fear arrive anyway, but we sacrifice countless moments to our worries. Ideally we would wake each morning, stretch, and perform a short mindfulness meditation during which we give thanks for a new day. Sadly, our minds often hit the fast forward button and worry is quick to set in. We wake to a giant itinerary flashing on the insides of our eyelids, and on our walls the minute our eyes open. So many of us have forgotten the art of how to greet a day.

Thoughts of tasks we must complete race through our minds, and we become consumed by our perceived shortage of time. We believe we will never accomplish

all we need to, and run around often starting new tasks before prior tasks are completed.

In reality we have time, but anxiety is the vacuum that sucks our time away, and once we allow it to be sucked away, it is lost forever.

Central to our unreasonable expectations of ourselves is "I Should" thinking. When we inundate ourselves with this kind of faulty cognition, we beat ourselves up for not meeting our own lofty goals.

The target of our worry is often an undesirable chore we believe will cause us distress. This feeds in to the notion anxiety is the expectation of a poor outcome. The more we focus on expected failures, the more anxious we become. Often times anxiety results in avoidance of tasks which ultimately leads to the failure we imagined. The cycle is vicious.

We also have a tendency to overwhelm ourselves by stressing about an entire to do list we believe must be completed in one day, or we have failed. We visualize all we must do as one big beast, when if we focus on one item at a time, not only does the beast shrink and become easily tamed, but we are more likely to perform each task with more efficiency as we are attuned to it instead of being preoccupied with what comes next.

A few moments of mindfulness meditation each day can keep us focused on where we most need to be; the present moment.

When we go to bed at night we often ruminate on all we did not accomplish, rather than laud ourselves for our successes. As we convince ourselves we came up short that day, low mood creeps in, and we tell ourselves our best is never good enough.

We also have a tendency to ruminate on past events in our lives we would change if we could. Once regret kicks in the door, depression gets its chance to storm in and occupy our minds with visions of people we have hurt or decisions detrimental to our own lives. There are not too many of these moments we could go back and change. There is greater value in letting go of past foibles while focusing on how not to repeat them in the present.

Being in the moment not only reduces our stress, but it allows us to focus our attention where it is most needed, and helps us assimilate information necessary to

be effective in task completion. Our chances of hearing a supervisor's instructions are poor if we are already contemplating chores at home. Failure to accomplish tasks to the best of our ability decreases our self-esteem, which feeds depression and anxiety.

Because we have trained our brains to fixate on future and past, mindfulness takes effort, and like all good habits relies on consistency. Like any strength training, results are incremental, but benefits are immediate. None of us who has ever tried to lift weights achieved our maximum weight or reps on our first day. Patience with ourselves is mandatory, but we are too often unkind to ourselves.

Mindfulness practice begins with focus on our breathing. We may notice our breath to be shallow as we race around the world, but because breathing is a function both involuntary and voluntary, we have the ability to slow it down and pay attention to how each deeper breath feeds us. The increased oxygen is a stress reducer, and control over our breath is a natural remedy for panic attack.

App stores are filled with free mindfulness programs for our smartphones, and the internet is flooded with articles on practicing mindfulness for beginners and advanced practitioners. Our first goal is to slow down enough to read a few before we begin our practice. You can assess your mindfulness skills by noting how many thoughts intruded as you tried to read this piece, in the same way I noted my intrusive thoughts of while I wrote it. Enjoy the moment!