



## UICS NEWS

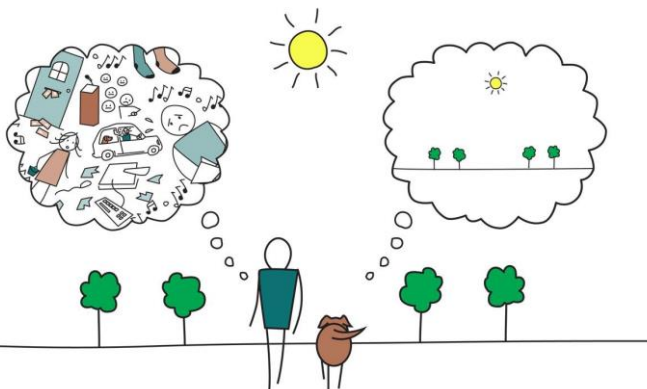
Wow! Summer is here again and in full swing. Do you ever get the feeling that time is just flying by? Many people do and often this has to do with not paying enough attention while life is happening. Paying attention in this way is also known as mindfulness. So what is mindfulness?

Jon Kabat-Zinn, a leading researcher on the topic, defines mindfulness as: "the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally, to the unfolding of experience moment by moment." Okay, so, what does that mean? Well, one way to understand what mindfulness is, is to understand what it is not. Simply put, mindfulness is *NOT* living on "autopilot."

Many people tend to go through much of their day-to-day lives in an unconscious manner, almost like sleep-walking. Most people can think of times when they've gone from point A to point B, but can't remember how they got there. Being mindful means being fully conscious and aware in the moment; not having our body in one place and our mind somewhere else.

Mindfulness also has many implications for mental health and well-being. A lot of the struggles people experience with issues such as stress, anxiety and depression can be alleviated with the practice of mindfulness. In this issue of the newsletter, we will introduce a number of simple practices to help you cultivate more mindfulness in your life. And, as always, the UICS staff is here to help you navigate whatever obstacles you meet with along life's journey.

*The Team @UICS*



Mind Full, or Mindful?

## 6 Brief Mindfulness Exercises

Here are 6 brief mindfulness exercises you can incorporate into your day if you're feeling pressed for time.

### **1. Two mindful bites.**

Try mindfully eating the first two bites of any meal or snack. Pay attention to the sensory experiences - the texture, taste, smell, and appearance of the food, and the sounds when you bite into your food. You don't need to savor per se, you're just paying attention to your sensory experience in an experiential rather than evaluative way.

### **2. The feeling of one breath.**

Try paying attention to the feeling of one breath. Feel the sensations of one breath flowing into and out from your body. Notice the sensations in your nostrils, your shoulders, your rib cage, your belly etc. Do this at various times throughout your day.

### **3. A few mindful steps.**

When you go for a walk, take a moment to feel the sensation of your body moving and your feet as they meet with the ground. Become aware of the other sensations you experience along the way, such as the sights, sounds and smells of your environment.

### **4. Take a mindful moment to give your brain a break instead of checking your email.**

Instead of checking your email in the 5 minutes you have between activities, spend a few moments in silence, without doing anything. Use mindfulness to give your brain a break rather than filling up every tiny space in your day by automatically reaching to check your email.

### **5. Air on exposed skin.**

Pay attention to the feeling of air on your skin for 10-60 seconds. This is best done when wearing short sleeves or with some skin exposed. This is practicing being in experiential processing mode (as opposed to evaluative "judging" mode, which is our default).

### **6. Scan your body.**

Scan your body from top to toe for any sensations of discomfort or tension. Attempt to soften to the sensations of discomfort. Next, scan your body for any sensations of comfort or ease.

*"Be happy in the moment, that's enough. Each moment is all we need, not more." — Mother Teresa*

## Mindfulness Meditation Benefits

Oh mindfulness meditation, how do we love thee? Let us count the ways.

Even though the academic research on mindfulness meditation isn't as robust as, say, nutrition or exercise, there *is* a reason why it's been around for literally thousands of years.

- 1. It lowers stress — literally.** Research published in the journal *Health Psychology* shows that mindfulness is not only associated with *feeling* less stressed, it's also linked with decreased levels of the stress hormone cortisol.
- 2. It lets us get to know our true selves.** Mindfulness can help us see beyond those rose-colored glasses when we need to really objectively analyze ourselves. A study in the journal *Psychological Science* shows that mindfulness can help us conquer common “blind spots,” which can amplify or diminish our own flaws beyond reality.
- 3. It changes the brain in a protective way.** University of Oregon researchers found that integrative body-mind training — which is a meditation technique — can actually result in brain changes that may be protective against mental illness. The meditation practice was linked with increased signaling connections in the brain, something called axonal density, as well as increased protective tissue (myelin) around the axons in the anterior cingulate brain region.
- 4. It works as the brain's “volume knob.”** Ever wondered *why* mindfulness meditation can make you feel more focused and zen? It's because it helps the brain to have better control over processing pain and emotions, specifically through the control of cortical alpha rhythms (which play a role in what senses our minds are attentive to), according to a study in the journal *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience*.
- 5. It makes music sound better.** Mindfulness meditation improves our focused engagement in music, helping us to truly enjoy and experience what we're listening to, according to a study in the journal *Psychology of Music*.
- 6. It helps us even when we're not actively practicing it.** You don't have to actually be meditating for it to still benefit your brain's emotional processing. That's the finding of a study in the journal *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience*, which shows that the amygdala brain region's response to emotional stimuli is changed by meditation, and this effect occurs even when a person isn't actively meditating.
- 7. It has four elements that help us in different ways.** The health benefits of mindfulness can be boiled down to four elements, according to a *Perspectives on Psychological Science* study: body awareness, self-awareness, regulation of emotion and regulation of attention.
- 8. It makes you a better person.** Sure, we love all the things meditation does for *us*. But it could also benefit people we interact with, by making us more compassionate, according to a study in the journal *Psychological Science*. Researchers from Northeastern and Harvard universities found that meditation is linked with more virtuous, “do-good” behavior.
- 9. It supports your weight-loss goals.** Trying to shed a few pounds to get to a healthier weight? Mindfulness could be your best friend, according to a survey of psychologists conducted by Consumer Reports and the American Psychological Association. Mindfulness training was considered an “excellent” or “good” strategy for weight loss by seven out of 10 psychologists in the survey.
- 10. It helps you sleep better.** We saved the best for last! A University of Utah study found that mindfulness training can not only help us better control our emotions and moods, but it can *also* help us sleep better at night. “People who reported higher levels of mindfulness described better control over their emotions and behaviors during the day. In addition, higher mindfulness was associated with lower activation at bedtime, which could have benefits for sleep quality and future ability to manage stress,” study researcher Holly Rau said in a statement.

- Adapted from an article by Amanda L. Chan Managing Editor, Healthy Living



UNLESS THE MOMENT IS UNPLEASANT,  
IN WHICH CASE I WILL EAT A COOKIE

### Mindful Sitting Meditation

1. Assume an erect, comfortable sitting position on a chair or cushion. Keep your spine straight and self-supporting, and let your shoulders drop. Close your eyes if it feels comfortable.
2. Bring your attention to your belly or the rim of your nostrils, and feel the sensation of each in-breath and each out-breath.
3. Keep the focus of your attention on your breathing, being with each in-breath for its full duration and each out-breath for its full duration, as if you are riding the waves of your own breathing.
4. Every time you notice that your mind has wandered off the breath, notice what it was that took you away and then gently bring your attention back to the sensation of each breath coming in and out.
5. If your mind wanders away from the breath a thousand times, then your “job” is simply to bring it back to the breath every time, no matter what it becomes preoccupied with.
6. Practice this exercise for 15 minutes or more at a convenient time every day. Be aware of how it feels to spend some time each day just being with your breath without having to do anything.