

How to stress less: the art of mindfulness

Here's the buzz: A form of meditation called mindfulness-based stress reduction, or MBSR, has been shown in many studies to help with chronic pain, hypertension, anxiety and depression. It might even help you sleep better.

The practice, which traces its roots to Buddhism, has become so enormously popular that in early February it was on the cover of Time, with the headline "The Mindfulness Revolution." Among enthusiasts are more than 300 U.S. medical centers and universities, the Super Bowl-winning Seattle Seahawks, General Mills, the US government, which offers soldiers courses in it – and an untold number of stressed-out, multitasking, digitally dependent Americans.

Could it be the secret to health and happiness? Or at least keep you out of the cardiologist's office?

No one is making promises at UC Irvine's Susan Samueli Center for Integrative Medicine, where MBSR courses have been part of the curriculum since 2010. But many course graduates say the practice has helped them de-stress and take better care of themselves. The key, they say, is being mindful, or paying attention to the present moment.

"A lot of things in our society pull us away from the present moment," says Dr. Don Maurer, an emergency room physician who teaches the classes. "Email, cellphones, always being on call for everyone – our stress level constantly increases."

Mindfulness takes its practitioners out of that spiraling cycle. They learn basic meditation skills, which focus on being tuned into the here and now, and are encouraged to concentrate on their breathing and their body, to notice but not judge their thoughts and to generally live in the moment.

Studies indicate MBSR works because practitioners learn to regulate their emotions and to change their perspective.

Classes at the Samueli Center range from one day to eight weeks. Participants receive guided instruction in mindfulness meditation, gentle stretching and yoga. For the most part, practitioners meditate while seated in chairs or lying on yoga mats. There also are group discussions, home assignments and home practice materials.

Meditation sessions usually last 20 to 30 minutes and are led by an instructor who speaks in a calm, soothing voice. In a typical session, participants may be told to focus on their breath and the sensation of air moving in and out of their lungs. They're also told to be kind to themselves, avoiding self-criticism.

One of the primary goals of the courses is learning self-compassion.

"We have a tendency to berate ourselves," says Beth Mulligan, a physician's assistant at the Samueli Center who teaches the classes. "That little voice inside our heads is very critical; it uses harsh words to remind us of our mistakes. Self-compassion is a far better motivator than the lash of self-criticism."

When the classes first began at the Samueli Center, the main intent was to help those with major illnesses learn to re-focus their attention on something other than their pain. But the program was so popular with the general public that the classes now serve everyone.

"MBSR is for anyone at any age, and the reasons people take classes vary," according to the Samueli Center website.

"Some have demanding jobs or responsibilities and they want to learn how to cope; others are referred by their physicians to help treat high blood pressure, anxiety or insomnia. Other students attend MBSR classes to learn to cope after a traumatic event."

In addition, many professionals, including physicians and counselors, attend to learn more about MBSR and incorporate it into their practices.

During a recent session, Mulligan led a meditation exercise aimed at self-compassion, in which she asked participants to silently wish themselves peace, safety, health and happiness.

One of the participants, a retired nurse, smiled. "It's so simple, yet so complex," she said. "I used to be anxious all the time. But now I'm getting over it. I think this is just what I needed."