

MIND OVER NOISE: WHY MINDFULNESS IS NO LONGER OPTIONAL

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We need to be more aware of our minds above all the external and internal noises that we experience. External noise, from traffic, from people, is exponentially rising. But the noise inside our heads is also rising proportionally, and perhaps more so. While we are aware of the noise outside, we are not so aware of the noise inside. When we are not aware of what we are thinking or doing, then we are not aware of how we behave or react. That awareness is key, and when you're mindful, then you are more aware and more responsible.

Eastern wisdom is thousands of years old, whereas Western psychology is under 200 years old. We knew it all for much longer, but we never properly learned it. But now, we have the reach and information. We have become strangers to stillness and silence. When you're talking to somebody, you cannot concentrate because you are somewhere else.

Why is this happening? Why are we so distracted? We spend all our time on screens. That includes small, medium, and large screens, for around 8 hours, and some studies have suggested 12 to 14 hours. 54% of teens say they spend too much time on their mobile phones. 41% admit to overdoing it. These are the kind of people that we are seeing in the clinic every day. We are on the screen far longer than we are asleep. We are becoming humans with a monkey mind; the mind is so fickle and restless, like a monkey jumping from one branch to another without actually knowing why they're jumping.

What is the impact of digital overload on our minds? A Forbes study suggested that we are bombarded with 3,000-plus digital ads, on average, per day. The average human mind wanders 47% of the time. A study was done where they called and asked people, what are you doing right now?

Thousands of people were asked, and the data revealed that 47% of people said they didn't know what they were doing. Information overload results in chronic stress, anxiety, poor sleep, emotional numbing, and emotional detachment. Consequently, it impacts our relationships. It reduces emotional awareness, and it increases impulsivity and irritability.

Sadhguru said it very nicely: the modern generation has got information but not the experience. Therefore, they are full of opinion, without actually having a practical understanding. So, information with experience is what is required, but our information overload is so much that we have no time to experience it.

The future depends on where we place our attention today. In the US alone, the childhood ADHD diagnoses have risen by over 40%. Adult ADHD diagnoses are also on the rise. One in four adults with ADHD may be inaccurately diagnosed because of poor assessments, questionnaires, and analysis of childhood problems. ADHD cannot develop in adult life; it will always develop in childhood. So even when we call it adult ADHD, it is a continuation of childhood ADHD. 7-8% of children with attention problems, hyperactivity, and behavioural problems that were assessed for ADHD are diagnosed with ADHD. 40-50% have severe attention problems, but there will be other causes, which could include sleep deprivation, stress, demands, and so on. In adults, even in India, although with inconsistent data, the studies have suggested that it could be between 2.5% to 8%.



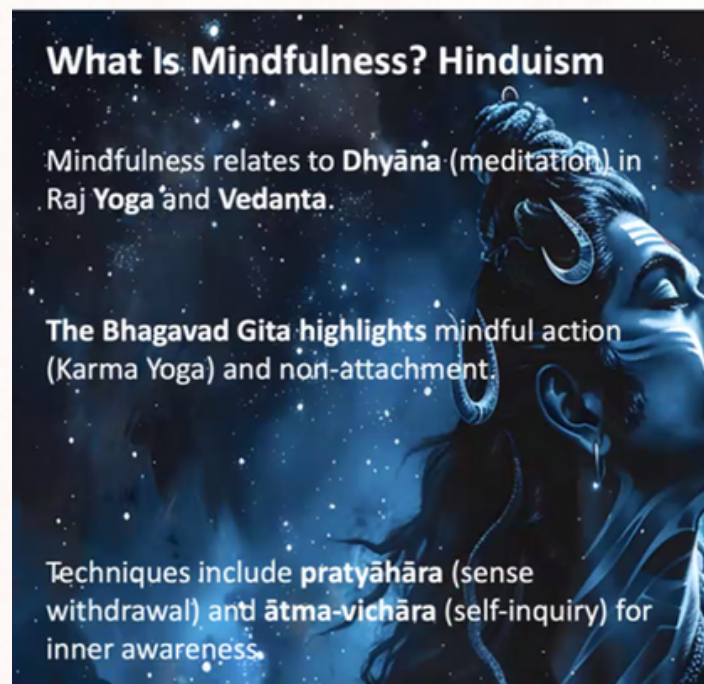
What is mindfulness? It involves having a non-judgmental attention to thoughts, emotions, and physical sensations of the body. You can appreciate a thought, or be aware of a thought, or an emotion. Cultivating awareness is to interrupt an automatic pattern of reactivity. We know there's enough research to say that if you're aware of your anger and if you're aware of the causes of your anger, then your anger will subside very quickly. So, it is to move you from reactivity to a conscious response.

In the Eastern tradition, especially in Buddhism, there is a word called *Sati*, which is mindfulness, which is a part of the Noble Eightfold Path. Buddha emphasised the moment-to-moment awareness of the body, mind, and surroundings. Zen Buddhism, which is mainly derived from Bodhi Dharma, encourages mindfulness through daily activities. I remember an example from Buddhist teachings. They say that somebody attended the place where Buddha was, and he lived with them for some time. He said, I want to be with you and practice meditation, and he spent a few days and realised that there was nothing happening there. He even then asked Buddha, I'm not quite sure what you guys are doing here?

What Is Mindfulness in Contemporary world

"Paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally."

— Jon Kabat-Zinn



That's what Raj Yoga is, and of which Asanas, or the Suryanamaskaras, are only one part.

Mindfulness and spiritual disciplines are aimed at inner clarity, liberation from suffering, and union with the true self of reality. We want inner clarity, but we are not even aware of the inner self. We want liberation from suffering, but we are getting more and more entangled in suffering. We are disconnected from ourselves because of external distractions and interruptions.

Mindfulness in these traditions is not just a mental skill, but a path to self-awareness, to non-attachment, and to a very ethical way of living. Jon Kabat-Zinn is a very well-known person. He came out with a very good book called *Full Catastrophe Living*, and he popularised mindfulness in Western countries. Before him, when they talked about mindfulness or meditation, it was often seen as a religious practice. People didn't want to associate with it; they wanted to keep science separate from religion and spirituality. But Jon Kabat-Zinn changed this.

If you look at Harvard studies, structural studies of the brain show an increase in grey matter density in the part of the brain area linked to emotional regulation. The University of Washington has suggested that retention improved by 30-40% when you're doing mindful practices. Regular mindfulness leads to enhanced empathy and relationship satisfaction. It also lowers the cortisol level, which is the stress hormone. There is scientific evidence for meditation. MBSR, Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction, was devised by Jon Kabat-Zinn. They did an 8-week study of people who did MBSR and showed an increase in grey matter in the hippocampus, responsible for memory and learning, and the amygdala, which is the stress centre of the brain.

It was considered that after some time, our brain stops learning and growing. But that's wrong. Neuroplasticity suggests that our brain is always growing. It's constantly rewiring as we learn new things, as we do new things, as we meditate, as we relax, as we experience stress, as we experience trauma. It is always forming new patterns and new wires as a way of helping us to cope and communicate better. It improves the white matter in the angular interior cingulate cortex of the brain and promotes synaptic strengthening in different parts of the brain or networks. Things like mindfulness-based stress reduction and mindfulness-based cognitive therapy reduce stress and pain. Our pain perception reduces, and so does the necessity for painkillers. Mindfulness-based cognitive therapy was devised and taken from MBSR, developed in England by Mark Williams. They looked at preventing depressive relapses. They were doing cognitive therapy with people, but they were becoming unwell again. Then we have dialectical behaviour therapy, which is essentially for emotional regulation. If you teach them to become aware of their emotions, that then has a positive impact on their behaviour, and that has a positive impact on their relationships and how they relate to the world. The new one we have is Acceptance and Commitment Therapy. It helps people to accept their emotions.

What are the core practices of mindfulness? Simply sitting down, eyes closed or open, focusing on the breath, body, and sounds is key.

Facets of Mindfulness

- Observing: noticing sensations & emotions.
- Describing: expressing inner experience.
- Acting with Awareness: non-automatic action.
- Non-Reactivity: letting go.
- Non-Judging: accepting thoughts.

So, when you sit down to practice meditation, your mind is still wandering everywhere. You have to gently bring it back, become aware of the thoughts. Meditation involves trying to concentrate on the gaps between thoughts. This gap between thoughts is pure peace. Over time, as you meditate, the gap keeps increasing, and the extent of the peace increases. A technique to contain anxiety, the 54321 techniques, in which you notice 5 things you see, four things you feel, three things you hear, two things you smell, and one thing you taste, is a commonly used technique for anxiety. When you do this, you're taking yourself away from what you're worrying about.

Here are 5 truths to remember. Mindfulness is a modern default, and we are stuck on autopilot. Constantly reacting, rarely reflecting, rarely aware of where our mind is. Sometimes you're watching a movie, and you've missed a single major chunk of the movie, not knowing what was happening. Many people say that I left work, and I reached home, and I don't quite know how I reached home, my mind was completely lost



Mindfulness isn't a luxury. It's essential for emotional clarity and focus. All your distractions, all the things that you're engaging in, are feeding distress, the digital overload, and the speed at which we are bombarded with information is fuelling our fragmented mind and thought processes, it's fuelling anxiety and burnout. Awareness must be a turning point. The shift begins by noticing the simple things in life, by pausing and creating a space for that awareness. Be very consistent with just a few mindful moments daily. By increasing those moments, day by day, you can transform your mental state from being mindless to mindful: from being unhealthy to being a very healthy and happy person. We need to shift from being mindless in everything we do, whether it's our relationships, our interactions, our activities, our behaviour, our pursuits or our desires in life. And it'll bring about significant changes. Thank you for listening, and I hope it was helpful.

Q and A

Q. Many psychiatrists advise against meditation for persons with severe mental illness. How valid is this?

A. When persons are in a decompensated state in severe mental illness, then meditation is not just not advisable, but it cannot be practised, because the person is too unwell to sit still or take note of the mind processes. But in all the other mental health issues, mindful practices will help people.

Q. When my body is fatigued, how can I talk about mindfulness and meditation?

A. When experiencing stress, you get mental and physical exhaustion. Mentally, when you're exhausted, you don't enjoy things, you don't want to do things. When you're physically exhausted, you don't want to go to the gym, you don't want to go for a walk, and so on. So, if you're physically fatigued, then it's very likely that there is a mental component to it.

Q. Can patients do guided meditation, but find it difficult to do on their own?

A. Guided meditation is exactly the same as meditation that you're doing on your own. If you do it in a group, then the teacher is asking you to focus on different parts of the body and move gradually upwards from your toes. On YouTube, somebody's guiding you to a more relaxing, nicer place than you are. They're making you imagine that you're feeling much calmer, and you're no longer tensed. So guided meditation would be a start to doing meditative practices without guidance.

Q. In the morning, I feel anxious and depressed. How do I cope with this? What to do against overthinking?

A. After resting at night, if you wake up in the morning feeling still anxious, then you need to seek professional help, and do more than what other people would do. Overthinking is a habit; your mind is wandering everywhere without actually knowing. You can journal and write about your worries, and then try to work on each of those worries by processing the overthinking.

Q. Could you tell me how to improve my working memory?

A. Read and listen very attentively. Memory is a byproduct of attention, so when we are attentive, we can register and recall information. But if you're not attentive, you can't. For example, when watching a movie, if you've watched it properly, then you remember the story properly. But if you were talking to someone on the phone at the same time, then you neither saw the movie properly, nor do you remember it properly. So, do one thing at a time to improve memory.