

## **Mindfulness: What it is, What it is not**

More and more people worldwide are attracted to learning how to relate to their experience with mindfulness. Because of my own personal experience and through work with students and teachers, I want to address some common misconceptions I've encountered. I share this with the teachers with whom I work in K-5 before I begin sharing the curriculum in their class. I hope you find it helpful.

### **What Is Mindfulness?**

Mindfulness, as defined by Jon Kabat-Zinn who introduced Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) 30 years ago, is “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally.”

### **Mindfulness is not about being calm or any particular way**

We often expect mindfulness will bring us peace or calm and relaxation. This highlights our human tendency to want pleasant experiences and to push away what is unpleasant or average. We want something, we don't get it and then we're unhappy. We think it's not working or we're doing it wrong. We start to judge our experience and ourselves.

Although it's true that you can experience a sense of peace, calm, or relaxation while practicing mindfulness, these are not guaranteed outcomes. Mindfulness is just about noticing whatever experience we're having, including all the thoughts, feelings or physical sensations that are a part of it.

### **Mindfulness can significantly reduce stress but it's not about stress reduction**

Rather than remove stress, mindfulness helps us learn to relate to stress differently. It may seem implausible that something as simple as listening to sounds or paying attention to our breathing can help us learn to respond to experiences in a healthy way, but it's what science is showing and what people are saying (and it's certainly my experience).

There is now over 25 years of research with adults showing that mindfulness helps with stress by changing our relationship to it.

### **Mindfulness is not the absence of thought**

Instead of aiming for an empty or blank mind where no thoughts are present, we learn the skill of becoming aware of our thoughts, without necessarily doing anything *with* them. By just noticing thoughts, we learn how to unhook ourselves from our identification with them. This is different from pushing thoughts away. It's how we relate to our thoughts, not the absence of them.

### **Mindfulness is not about being complacent**

Acceptance does not mean agreement or complacency. It means acknowledging whatever's going on, which is a good idea because it's already happening. We take action to change situations when appropriate - for our well-being and the well-being of others - but we do so out of compassion and understanding versus reaction and frustration.

### **Mindfulness is not religious**

Mindfulness practices are useful for all people, regardless of their spiritual or religious backgrounds or beliefs. It's a human experience that utilizes awareness and compassion that is within us all.

### **Mindfulness is not a silver bullet**

When we're under stress or going through a difficult time we might look for 'techniques' to help us better cope. Mindfulness works, but it is important to approach it with the right attitude. Based on many years of research, it is well established that in order to fully benefit from mindfulness meditation, the best approach is to have a long-term view.

Happy Practicing! And please email me if you have questions about any of this.

Warm regards,

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