

Mindfulness – An approach to healthy life

■ Sushmita Borah, Sampreety Gogoi and Tulika Borah

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■ **ABSTRACT** : Mindfulness is a buzzword at present times. It is a psychological process of bringing one's attention to situations occurring in the present. In simple terms, mindfulness is living at the present moment and paying attention to each and every situations of life. Mindfulness being a skill or a technique can be learnt by anyone. Though it has been practiced from ancient times in various religious traditions, it has been gaining popularity only in the last few years, due to its effective properties and benefits on every individuals of every age group. Mindfulness causes certain brain changes in the structure and function of the brain. Certain parts of the brain such as the pre-frontal cortex, the hippocampus, and the anterior cortex increases in size and the amygdala tends to shrink which reduces stress and pain. Mindfulness can bring improvements in both physical and psychological symptoms as well as positive changes in health, attitudes and behavior. Studies show that practicing mindfulness can help us manage mild depression, anxiety and other common health problems. In this highly competitive and busy world, mindfulness has been found fruitful, for all individuals for maintaining a healthy way of life. Mindfulness is now being examined in a scientific manner and is found as a key element in stress reduction, overall happiness and well-being. It is helpful for every age group. It can be practiced by children, adolescents, adults and also during old age. Meditation is one of the key techniques used in mindfulness training. Besides meditation, simple mindful practices in everyday life can result in sustainable high performance in individuals. Mindfulness can help us enjoy life more and understand ourselves in a healthy manner. So, every individual should practice mindfulness in their everyday life so as to maintain a healthy way of living and improve their quality of life.

■ **KEY WORDS**: Mindfulness, Brain, Emotions, Approach, Healthy life

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See end of the paper for authors' affiliations

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Sushmita Borah

Department of Human
Development and Family Studies,
College of Community Science,
Assam Agricultural University,
Jorhat (Assam) India
Email : sushmitaborah@gmail
.com

Life of an individual in the modern world, is at an increasing pace. The complexity and the competitions of the modern world place extra demands on the individual, as a result every individual are being overscheduled and running out of their time. They are becoming more productive and are involved in multi-tasking to accomplish their works on time. Everyone

has their own needs, desires, wants that are to be fulfilled to achieve a good lifestyle. Due to high-paced life-style, majority of them suffer from stress, frustrations, anxiety, depression and other problems which automatically affects the health of an individual as a result they are not able to lead a healthy life. There are many techniques which people can use to overcome their stress and other

health - related problems, but one such free and effective technique includes the practice of mindfulness or meditation. Mindfulness practice is of major importance, especially in today's complicated world, as it is now considered as a key to happiness and an effective technique for improving the physical and emotional well being thereby leading to the healthy life of an individual. Mindfulness is a basic human ability that can be developed through practice. It is defined as paying attention in a particular way; on the purpose, in the present moment, and non judgmentally (Kabat-Zinn, 1991). Basically, to be mindful means being aware and awake in every moment of life. The key features of mindfulness are:

- Mindfulness involves intentionally and purposefully directing our attention rather than letting it wander.
- Mindfulness involves being fully engaged with an attentive mind at the present moment.
- Mindfulness involves accepting and being non-judgmental towards whatever arises in the moment.

Mindfulness teaches us to be more compassionate with ourselves, more caring and more accepting of our situations in a non-judgemental way. Mindfulness practice is not only linked to wellbeing and stress reduction but it is also linked to increased creativity, productivity, physical health, self esteem and quality of relationships. Mindfulness is now considered as an approach to healthy life as it reduces symptoms of stress, anxiety and depression, making it a powerful brain training tool. It is the perfect way to take care of the brain and keeping it healthy. Well-being achieved through mindfulness contributes to a sustainable way of life. Research indicates that mindfulness can contribute to environmental friendly and sustainable behaviour.

Origin of mindfulness:

Mindfulness is a practice involved in various religious and secular traditions, right from the ancient time. Originally, mindfulness is associated with Buddhist psychology. The term "mindfulness" corresponds to Pali term *Sati*, which is a significant element of Buddhist traditions and also comes from a Sanskrit word "*Smrti*" which means "to be remembered" as in Vedic tradition. Later, it was adapted into structured programmes by Dr. Jon-Kabat-Zinn and the two main approaches developed by him in recent years are Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) and Mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT) both of

which are taught in a number of sessions which helps people manage long term health conditions and enhance their general wellbeing.

Mindfulness and its impact on brain:

Mindfulness helps the brain to be calm, less stressed and have better attention. Mindfulness causes certain changes in the structure and function of the brain. The brain generally has two networks- Default mode network (DMN) and Task positive network (TPN). The DMN is active when the brain is at rest and it starts wandering, which involves thinking about others, about one-self, remembering the past and thinking about the future by ignoring the present whereas TPN is active during attention demanding task and it is responsible for the present moment. When mindfulness is practiced, the TPN gets activated and the DMN is deactivated. The TPN then become stronger and thicker, and becomes spontaneous and the default mode become weaker and eventually starts to disappear. Mindfulness has a dramatic impact on the pre-frontal cortex of the brain, which is the major region for higher ordered thinking, this region of the brain increases in size. The insula of the brain is also affected by mindfulness practice, which integrates sensations and emotions together and is essential for self-awareness capacity of an individual. The amygdala tends to shrink which reduces stress and the cortical cell in the hippocampus is increased that regulates emotions. Neuroscientists have shown that those who meditate regularly have certain brain changes that becomes visible within eight weeks of mindfulness practice. It is associated with changes in specific brain areas that are essential for attention, learning and regulating emotions.

Benefits of mindfulness:

Mindfulness is a mind-body practice that has been found to benefit in various aspects. According to American Psychological Association the benefits of mindfulness includes (Davis and Hayes, 2011).

Psychological benefits :

- Increased awareness of one's mind
- Significantly reduced stress, anxiety and negative emotions
- Increased control over ruminative thinking (a major cause and symptom of depression and anxiety)
- Increased mental flexibility and focus

- More working memory
- Decreased distracting thoughts
- Decreased emotional reactivity
- Increased capacity for intentional, responsive behaviours
- Increased empathy, compassion and conscientiousness of other's emotions.

Physiological benefits:

- Enhanced immune system functioning
- Increased brain density and neural integration in areas responsible for positive emotions, self-regulation, and long-term planning
- Lowered blood pressure
- Lowered levels of blood cortisol, a major stress hormone
- Greater resistance to stress-related illnesses such as heart disease.

Spiritual benefits:

- Increased self-insight and self-acceptance
- Increased acceptance of others
- Increased compassion and empathy
- Increased sense of morality, intuition, and courage to change
- Increased control over automatic behaviors
- Increased self-discipline.

To be mindful a person needs to be aware of their surroundings, actions and emotions and pay attention carefully to the environment. Mindfulness is a skill that can be learned by anyone through little effort, time, patience and ongoing practices. Mindfulness can be practiced by paying attention, living in the moment and accepting our-self. It can also be practiced by doing some structured exercises such as sitting meditation, body scan meditation, walking meditation and soles of feet meditation.

Mindfulness exercises can also be practiced under experts which includes:

Mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT):

A structured programme to manage depression carried out for eight weeks in two hour sessions, delivered by a qualified practitioner.

Mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR):

A structured programme to manage general stress.

It is usually carried out for eight weeks in two-hour sessions, delivered by a qualified practitioner.

Mindfulness practiced in buddhist centres:

It includes traditional buddhist practices of mindfulness meditation and other mindful techniques, taught at buddhist centre in context of buddhist teachings.

Mindfulness for children, parents and teachers:

Children of all ages can be benefitted from mindfulness. Practicing mindfulness help children to cultivate resilience, regulate emotional stress and focus attention, understanding the basic life skills and helps in coping with traumatic situations. Mindfulness is an effective therapy for children and adolescents with aggression, Attention deficit hyperactive disorder, or mental health problems such as anxiety. As a result of mindfulness, positive qualities like empathy, kindness, compassion develops in children. The simple mindfulness activities for children are breathing in and out, nature walk, talking about gratitude, heart beat exercise, body scan meditation, mindful hearing and mindful seeing.

Parenting is a wonderful experience as well as a challenging task. Mindful parenting is about being present in parenting moment and it can be done by developing the qualities of being aware, listening to the child while interacting with them, cultivating emotional awareness, self regulation and bringing compassion and non-judgmental acceptance. Mindfulness can enhance the parent child relationship and also helps to reduce the stress and anxiety in parents of children with special needs.

Teacher is a role model to their student and they teach and build their knowledge and in doing so they may sometime become stressful. Mindfulness can help to release the stress and make the environment child friendly. Mindfulness can help them to reduce conflicts and develop more positive ways of relating in classroom. Mindfulness can help teachers to understand their own emotions better, communicate and manage their student effectively, set a positive learning environment and strengthen relationship with students (Duncan *et al.*, 2009; Naik *et al.*, 2013 and Pascual-Leone *et al.*, 1995).

Conclusion:

Mindfulness as an effective technique, has now been gaining much popularity throughout the world. It is

now considered as a therapy to overcome stress, anxiety and depression at various stages of life. Mindfulness has many proven benefits. It is proved beneficial for individuals of every age group. Due to its beneficial effects it is now being introduced in various areas such as schools, hospitals, clinics, criminal justice, workplace and in other settings under the supervision of mindfulness experts. Mindfulness practiced in everyday life can lead to a healthy life of an individual including children and adults. So everyone should try to develop the skill of being mindful at every moment through their continuous effort and practice.

Authors' affiliations:

Sampreety Gogoi and Tulika Borah, Department of Human Development and Family Studies, College of Community Science, Assam Agricultural University, Jorhat (Assam) India
(Email: sampreetygogoi@gmail.com)

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