

The Top 5 Most Common Misunderstandings about Mindfulness

Mindfulness meditation is becoming more and more popular every day as an increasing number of people around the world are attracted to learning the mindful way of relating to their experience, characterized by openness, acceptance and curiosity. As with learning any new set of skills, it is only natural that when we enter the path of mindfulness, we bring with us some misconceptions and errors about mindfulness meditation, without being fully aware of it.

From my own experience and from working with mindfulness students, I have come across the following most common misunderstandings:

1. Mindfulness Equals Relaxation

It can come as a surprise to many people that the process of learning mindfulness practices is not primarily aimed at relaxation. The words 'Mindfulness-based Stress Reduction' often evoke an image of a class full of people engaging in a relaxation or guided visualization exercise, which are techniques commonly used to combat stress.

Mindfulness, however, is not synonymous with relaxation. Its main focus is to learn how to be present with any state of mind or body, be it tense, agitated, relaxed or peaceful. Relaxation often comes as a by-product of a regular mindfulness practice but if we concentrate on *getting relaxed* while practicing mindfulness, this expectation and goal-oriented approach will actually get in the way of us simply being with *what is*.

2. Mindfulness is Getting Rid of Thoughts

It is very compelling to view mindfulness as a practice of pushing away all (and mainly unpleasant) thoughts. As human beings, we are inclined to actively manipulate situations with a desire to achieve a state of happiness and contentment. In doing so, we often employ a style of pushing away troubling thoughts or unpleasant images, with a hope that this will remove the pain.

In mindfulness, however, instead of aiming for a blank mind, where no thoughts are present, we learn the skill of becoming aware of our thoughts, without necessarily doing anything *with* them. By seeing thoughts arise, dwell and eventually dissolve, we learn how to unhook ourselves from our identification with them. This is different from pushing thoughts away.

3. Mindfulness is Religious

When Jon Kabat-Zinn in 1970's developed the Mindfulness-based Stress Reduction program, he was drawing upon the ancient Buddhist practices of calm abiding and insight (in Sanskrit *shamatha* and *vipashyana*). Those tools of working with the mind have been kept alive by an uninterrupted lineage of meditation practitioners, passing their lived experience and knowledge from teacher to disciple. I myself feel a profound gratitude for all the effort and diligence with which they practiced, thus making it possible for us to access these powerful practices in the 21st century.

To be a mindfulness practitioner, however, does not require becoming affiliated with any religion, philosophy or group. Mindfulness practices (as designed by Jon Kabat-Zinn) can be used by all people, regardless of their spiritual or religious background or belief. Indeed, the training of paying attention to a particular aspect of our experience in order to develop a greater flexibility and strength of mind, can be found in all cultures and for that reason mindfulness is absolutely universal.

4. Mindfulness Equals Therapy Groups

'Mindfulness-based Approaches' is a term that encapsulates the idea of using mindfulness in different fields within our society, for example in healthcare, education, sport or psychotherapy. The astounding work of many therapists and clinicians over the last 30 years in incorporating mindfulness into psychotherapy led to developments such as Mindfulness-based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT), Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), Dialectical Behavioral Therapy (DBT) and others. This connection of mindfulness with psychotherapy is possibly one of the reasons why some people assume that mindfulness courses equal group therapy.

The primary focus of mindfulness courses (both MBSR and MBCT) is to give participants an opportunity to learn mindfulness skills in a supportive group format, where they can explore the obstacles to their practice, gain insight into the workings of their mind and share the experiences of mindful living with other people in the group.

The group itself often serves as a powerful support system in times when people encounter a difficulty in their practice or when they lose inspiration. It is different, however, from a therapy group, where the focus is on exploring difficult issues (often from the past) and receiving emotional support from the group and the therapist in order to heal the psychological wounds.

5. Mindfulness is a Quick Fix

At times of distress and hardship, many of us naturally look for ways of re-gaining balance and finding relief from pain as quickly as possible. We might follow the well-worn path of rejecting an uncomfortable sensation or a thought by ignoring it, fighting it or obsessively ruminating about it. We might also look for 'techniques' to help us better cope with the challenging situation. In those difficult times, mindfulness might seem like a magic wand, promising a rapid and effective alleviation of our stress.

We know that mindfulness works, but it is important to approach it with the right attitude. Based on many years of research, it is now well established that in order to fully benefit from mindfulness meditation, the best approach is to have a long-term view, rather than expecting immediate results.

Similarly to learning the art of playing an instrument, we will need effort, enthusiasm and diligence to keep bringing our bodies back to the meditation cushion and bringing our minds back to the present moment. Mindfulness is effective (three minutes of gentle observation of breathing can profoundly change the way we feel), but impatience and a narrow goal-oriented view can easily get in the way of simply resting with our experience, which is the true heart of mindfulness.