

The Power of Mindful Meditation

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The human stress response was once an ancient tool necessary for survival. Over the years, our world has undergone an industrial and technological transformation. We are constantly bombarded with emails, texts, and information twenty-four hours a day, nonstop. The modern world has put our biological stress response in high gear. Our work and personal lives have become rushed, and we are under constant pressure. Consequently, our health suffers, and our thinking becomes hurried and confused. We become far less likely to make healthy lifestyle choices, like getting enough sleep, exercising regularly, and eating well. We forget to take care of ourselves, both physically and mentally. For this reason, over the past century, stress-induced diseases have become common. It is crucial for us to learn techniques for stress reduction and to recognize that these practices are relevant to our lives. Small changes in outlook and perception have the ability to dramatically augment the quality of our lives.

How can we find center and focus in our lives when we feel constant pressure? To make the most of our ability to live the life we have dreamed of, we need to change our perspective of the mundane and stray from habitual responses. Meditation, or more specifically mindfulness, is a practice that can help us develop a sense of tranquility.

Meditation in the general sense comprises of a wide variety of practices. Some involve intentional and controlled thinking, while others allow your mind to wander. All practices involve influencing the individual's consciousness through the regulation of attention [1]. Meditation usually entails a certain quietude of the mind and a sense of surrender to a deeper aspect of the mind [2]. Mindfulness, a specific form of meditation, involves the practice of living in and accepting the present moments [3]. Danny Penman, Ph.D., coauthor of *Mindfulness: An Eight-Week Plan for Finding Peace in a Frantic World*, explains that the practice has become widespread: "Mindfulness has gone from a niche practice to something embraced by tens—if not hundreds—of millions of people." The practice is more than just a new age trend; it produces results and is being implemented in more dynamic environments. Google offers its staff a program, some school districts have added it to teacher training, and it has even presented itself in Congress (see Rep. Tim Ryan's new book, *A Mindful Nation*).

If you are unfamiliar with meditation, the practice may seem like a mystery. "Meditation" might suggest an image of a monk sitting cross-legged, deep in concentration. You might associate meditation exclusively with Eastern religions such as Buddhism or Hinduism, but not associate it with Judaism. In actuality, there is evidence that Jews have implemented meditative practices throughout their history [4]. A Midrash showed that Abraham valued meditation and explained exactly how this began his career. Abraham discovered G-d through contemplation of existence and the meaning of life.

Through meditation, he ultimately formed a conversation and relationship with G-d. Abraham's experience can be seen as the paradigm of human connection to G-d. Commentaries on the life of Abraham suggest that when he sent his children off to the East bearing gifts, he included gifts with aspects of meditative practices. These practices eventually surfaced in Far Asian spiritual teachings, and some speculate that the Hindu caste of holy men called the "Brahman" was actually named after the Abrahamic tradition that initiated them [2]. Many Biblical accounts of the early holy men in Judaism involve meditative practice. Abraham's son Isaac was a meditator. His bride Rebecca first saw him when he was meditating in the fields (Genesis 24:63). Early shepherds generally chose the pastoral lifestyle in order to be able to meditate in the fields. Meditation is clearly an ancient practice in Judaism. Since the ideology of Judaism and its religious practices eventually migrated westward, it is appropriate for its meditative practices to migrate along with its more accepted religious practices.

With the rising mainstream popularity of meditation in recent years, it is interesting to explore its historical roots in Judaism. Although it is often overseen in discussion of the relevant Eastern religions that value meditation in their traditions, Judaism actually participated in dialogue with schools and mystical masters, producing one of the most important systems of practice [4]. As we look later in Jewish history, there is a longstanding tradition of meditation; Talmudic sages and mystical Kabbalists from the time of the Baal Shem Tov were known to meditate before and during prayer. Until the Jewish Enlightenment, meditation and mysticism were held as equally important to intellectualism. As Judaism shifted toward a more intellectual perspective, other Jewish values fell by the wayside. Anything semi-mystical was regarded as superstition and occultism and was presumed unworthy of serious study. The deeper meaning of the phenomenology of Jewish meditation was lost in the process.

Although meditation is an ancient practice that has been widely recognized throughout history as a true benefit to the human psyche, in recent years it has been categorized as "new science" in medical literature. The practice has been refreshed in a sense and is gaining popularity as a legitimate treatment for a plethora of illnesses. Moreover, when it comes to new science, it actually works—with no negative side effects.

The scientific community is conducting experiments to discover the extent of benefits of a meditative method of treatment. One experimental study ran two training sessions, each focusing on a different level and length of sustained meditation. Both interventions were effective at improving mood; however, only brief meditation training was found to reduce fatigue and anxiety and to increase mindfulness. Brief mindfulness training significantly improved visual-spatial processing, working memory, and executive

functioning [5]. Thus, the findings suggest that benefits are not only found in long-term meditators; even four days of meditation training is enough to enhance the ability to maintain attention. These benefits of mindfulness and meditation can be applied as treatment for patients with a variety of illnesses. When people are faced with chronic stress and an overactive limbic system, their sympathetic nervous system puts them into “fight-or-flight” mode. That continuous high-gear physiological response is taxing on the body and mind, and people eventually begin to exhibit physical symptoms [3]. The initial symptoms can be mild, such as headaches or increased susceptibility to flu and colds. As people have persistent stress and constant pressure, more serious health issues can develop. Stress-induced conditions include depression, obesity, diabetes, obsessive-compulsive disorder, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), anxiety disorder, ulcers, heart disease, and even cancer [2].

The scientific community is developing a mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) program as a legitimate treatment option. Although no one can be relaxed at all times, with mindfulness, one can learn to counteract the fight-or-flight response by flexing his or her relaxation response through the parasympathetic nervous system [3]. A person who practices mindfulness every day gains major brain bonuses. Human brains have a plasticity quality. The brain has the ability to change physically, functionally, and chemically throughout life [6]. The human body undergoes long-lasting functional changes as a result of a person developing and learning new things [7]. Thus, practicing mindfulness can actually change the structure of a person’s brain, strengthening the areas that control emotions and stress responses [3]. This means a person would have fewer stress hormones coursing through his or her body at any given time.

One study found the MBSR program is helpful in patients with coronary heart disease. Risk factors for the disease include anxiety and depression. Further risk is associated with stress, which leads to high blood pressure and heart rate, physical inactivity, and being overweight. The MBSR treatment was found to reduce psychological risk factors of anxiety and depression and symptoms of stress, blood pressure, and body mass index in the patients. The MBSR program shows improvements in people with stress-related illnesses [8].

Aside from its growing use in the health field, mindfulness has major payback for individual people who welcome it into their lives. An individual can attune the mind to discover a better understanding of his or herself [4]. Generally, we see ourselves through a thick veil of ego, and it is difficult to see ourselves as others see us. Through meditation, we can learn to see ourselves with a degree of objectivity. In this way, we can recognize our own shortcomings, and we can learn to overcome them. The Musar movement, one of the most important meditative movements in Judaism, taught that a person should strive to grow spiritually, ethically, and morally throughout his lifetime [4]. A combination of awareness techniques can be used to work on our character traits throughout our lifetime and to continuously grow toward self-perfection.

We cannot be mindful all the time, but moments of practice have a long-lasting cumulative effect. Obtaining a peaceful balanced soul

is an objective in Judaism, and the tools for attaining it are subtly integrated into the Torah laws [2]. The essence of this objective exists in the basic Hebrew greeting “shalom.” The word shalom is used as a salutation, but it also means “peace” and implies completion, wholeness and perfection. This word has significance in Judaism; we use it to bless each other, and we request peace in our prayers. Living a Torah lifestyle encompasses this idea and enriches both our inner experience on subtle levels, as well as our outer behaviors, habits, and relationships. Chassidic Jews believe that inner turmoil is reduced when we have a clear understanding of our goals and that the freedom of doubt that comes from faith and awareness enriches our lives with joy. The core values that we learn from the Torah laws nurture the whole meaning of shalom. They promote the experience of wholeness and a peaceful spirit. When we are aware of the meditative perspective, biblical laws take on a new significance, and we can recognize where mindfulness is reinforced in the Jewish tradition. In Judaism, we are meant to experience closeness to G-d in everything we do [4]. The Talmud developed this from the verse “In all your ways know Him” (Prov. 3:6). Working, praying, eating, and the simplest tasks can be turned into a more spiritual experience. As Jews, we can elevate even the most mundane activities to see G-d in every facet of life and to move toward an inner peace.

One of the primary techniques for attaining a peaceful soul is establishing regular times for meditation [2]. Rabbinic tradition guides us to pray three set times a day. Established times for making gratitude were introduced for the well-being of the individual. For prayer to reinforce our trust and yield a peaceful soul, we must recognize its meditative qualities. Mindful prayer is conscious of our connection to G-d and enhances our awareness of G-d’s presence in our daily lives. This practice of awareness augments our trust in a higher power. The Shema prayer is a specific blessing that portrays this mindful quality. Shema is a Jew’s basic declaration of faith in one individual G-d, and it should be said twice a day, throughout life. The Talmud explains that it is meant to be said only once at a time because of the prayer’s concept of unity. If a person prepares himself mentally and says the six words of the prayer very slowly, Shema could be an extremely powerful short daily meditation. It reinforces our relationship with G-d and our belief in a caring divine power. Having a mindful experience through prayer three times a day is an advanced form of meditation that is accessible to all. When we trust that G-d is benevolent and that we are where we are meant to be, we have a calm certainty and reach our ability to cope with problems and challenges in an effective way.

Mindfulness is also integrated into Judaism in the practice of reciting blessings before eating. Mindful eating includes bringing an appreciation to where our food comes from and acknowledging the energy that goes into its creation [9]. When we make a blessing before we eat or drink, we express gratitude for the nourishment with which we are provided. Once again, this Jewish practice takes on new meaning when we make an effort to be more conscious of this tradition. A mindful eater eats without judgment or guilt. Mindful eaters do not ignore body cues or eat when they are satiated. Being mindful means being aware of one’s body and knowing how it feels at all times. The individual becomes aware of tastes, textures and smells. This practice becomes a lifestyle that an individual can adopt to live more fully and healthily.

There are many aspects of mindfulness seen in the daily rituals of Judaism, and we can further apply this practice to even our most basic activities. One place to begin applying this practice into our lives is with simple relaxation exercises that involve bringing attention to the breath or other bodily sensations. Breathing is usually done automatically and is, therefore, normally under control of the unconscious mind [2]. Unless we consciously alter our breathing, it will mirror our unconscious mood. Yet, if we wanted to, we can control our breathing. Thus, breathing is a link between the conscious mind and the subconscious. If we can learn to concentrate on and control our breath, we can then learn how to control the subconscious mind. This is one of the most powerful benefits of practicing mindfulness. One learns to use the conscious mind to control mental processes that are ordinarily controlled by the unconscious. Gradually more and more of the subconscious becomes accessible to the mind until the person can control the whole thought process. With the link of the conscious and subconscious mind, an individual can gain a certain self-mastery. The individual is aware of his emotional temperature and has power

over his own thoughts and body. The person gains control of himself, never doing something he knows he really does not want to do. According to many opinions, self-mastery is one of the most important goals of meditation.

Attaining a peaceful soul, a core Torah value, can become integrated into our lifestyle if we open up to mindfulness. Increased quality of life comes with mindfulness. The meditator's world becomes richer; with increased awareness he or she begins to enjoy things other people may not notice. Meditative practices enable us to live life with mental calmness and composure and can guide us toward making good choices. We can meditate on how to rearrange our lives, and we might find ourselves thinking about fundamental questions such as what we ultimately want out of life, what gives our lives meaning, or what brings us happiness more than anything else in the world [4]. The Jewish tradition teaches that everything is in G-d's hands and that G-d is good to us. Through meditation, we truly internalize this perspective, and we attain a peaceful soul. In this way we can experience life at its best.

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When we meditate, we inject far-reaching and long-lasting benefits into our lives: We lower our stress levels, we get to know our pain, we connect better, we improve our focus, and we're kinder to ourselves. Let us walk you through the basics in our new mindful guide on how to meditate. By Mindful Staff. January 31, 2019. Meditation. moneti/Adobe Stock. This is a guidebook to the many different styles of meditation, the various benefits of each practice, plus free guided audio practices that help you learn how to meditate. How do you learn to meditate? In mindfulness meditation, weâ€™re lea Skip to content. Mindful in the Midst. The power of mindful meditation. Home. Privacy and Policy.Â Mindful in the Midst, Proudly powered by WordPress. Itâ€™s important to remember that Mindfulness must not be used to evade reality and the consequences of your acts. Release fears. Our minds and souls are used to hide fears that are really deep, but rough disciplined meditation, we may find those fears and emotional injuries that interrupt our connection with reality to understand ourselves better, and little by little, weâ€™ll be able to face and heal that past (which means changing our perception about it).Â The power of the mind to overcome health problems or at least to reduce pain is amazing, and with Mindful meditation, you may start to use this power every day, and youâ€™ll know yourself (and others) better through illnesses. Overcome Addictions. What is mindfulness meditation? How is it done? Learn how to get started with basic techniques, apps, and tips on incorporating mindfulness into your life.Â Since many people lose track of time while meditating, it can also ensure you're not meditating for too long. Be sure to also allow yourself time after meditation to become aware of where you are and get up gradually. Focus on Breathing. Become aware of your breath, attuning to the sensation of air moving in and out of your body as you breathe. Mindfulness meditation is a powerful and ancient meditation technique that is proven to help reduce stress, alleviate anxiety and depression, and even help with pain and illness. By re-training your mind to stay present and calm in the moment, mindfulness meditation changes the physical structure of your brain, creating long-lasting changes and positive, healthy habits. You might think something so powerful must be difficult or require a lot of training, but think again! Mindfulness meditation is free, easy to do, and the only effort it requires is sitting still for 10-30 minutes every day . A