

How mindfulness can help you cope with chronic illness. 01/12/2013.

Mindfulness meditation can be of benefit to everyone, growing evidence shows effects can include better concentration and focus; improved sleep; and reduced depression and anxiety. However, if you are living with a long term physical or mental health condition and/or chronic pain, discovering it can make the difference between feeling that all is lost and greatly improving your quality of life. It can even result in reduced pain and improvement in other symptoms.

What is mindfulness?

“Paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally” Kabat-Zinn (1994). This means developing an attitude of curiosity, openness and acceptance of the whole of our experience: physical, social, emotional, cognitive and sensory. Crucially, though, this is done without judgement about whether what we are experiencing is ‘positive’ or not. There is acceptance that whatever we experience just is. Your life can become enhanced as you notice and appreciate more of the detail in everyday sights, sounds, and sensations.

Could it help me with my mental health?

As well as frequently feeling rough, living with chronic pain and illness can mean on-going worry, uncertainty, frustration, loss, isolation, and anger. This can cause anxiety and depression, and the resulting stress can increase pain and the symptoms of many chronic conditions as we fight against our situation, mentally and physically pushing against our limitations as we desperately want to not be ill. This is of course natural and understandable, but it is not helpful because whether we resist or not, we are still ill.

Mindfulness is about living in the moment, because the present moment is all that we really have. Realising that the past is gone and the future is yet unknown can help you to take some control over your situation, giving choice in how to approach it. For example the common overwhelming thought that we can't cope with how we feel as we imagine the rest of our life struggling with ill health can actually amplify current symptoms, heighten anxiety, and make the good things we have fade into the background. Accepting the distress and upset of your situation and allowing yourself to feel this can also be helpful, it is real after all. Mindfulness helps us to realise that we can change our perspective, and in doing so gain a different relationship to our pain and illness. It can help put it in its place as a part, but not the whole, of us.

How can it help with my physical health?

The mind and body are not separate entities, one impacts on the other, and anything that assists us to live a more balanced life can help. In chronic conditions such as fibromyalgia and chronic fatigue syndrome (CFS/ME), some of the physiological affects can cause anxiety-like symptoms. When added to the stress of being ill these can further affect sleep, pain levels and overall quality of life. Chronic pain often results in tension being held around the sites of pain, and in the wider body as we resist it.

Developing mindful awareness can help to calm some of these symptoms and relax areas of tension, it can help us breathe more deeply and feel more centred. Mindfulness techniques can transform your experience of pain. For example, learning to breathe into areas of pain instead of resisting them

can open up the body, relaxing tension around painful areas. Being better able to choose where you put your attention means that you can change your perspective on pain from being overwhelmed by it, to opening up your awareness of the rest of your body and it's other sensations, making coping easier.

Mindfulness for beginners:

Try this short practice to see: take a minute to sit alone, close your eyes and listen. When you find your mind wandering, as it naturally will, just gently bring it back to listening. (Don't read further until you have done this.) What did you hear? How did it feel? You may have heard a distant car, the noises of your own body working, a clock, people walking outside, or maybe nothing at all. There is no 'right' or 'wrong' in mindfulness practice, whatever you experienced is ok because it is. This practice can show us how much there is in the present moment that we often don't notice in the busyness of our lives and minds.

Mindfulness to enhance your coping strategies:

If you already use relaxation techniques and pacing to manage your condition, or you want to get more in tune with your own needs to develop your coping strategies, mindfulness can be an invaluable tool. As you learn how to turn towards your body mindfully you will find it becomes easier to make decisions based on what is right for you. Gauging the limits of your energy; noticing what triggers a flare up of pain; and knowing how much you can do before you have 'overdone it' all become much easier. This means that you are more likely to do what helps you during activities and when you plan, and so better manage your illness. This can often lead to being able to do more, not less, as you learn to 'go with', rather than fight against, the limits of your illness.

How do I learn mindfulness?

There are many ways to incorporate mindfulness into your life, the ideal is to take an 8 week mindfulness meditation (MBSR) course, or go on a retreat where you immerse yourself in mindfulness and develop an on-going practice. If these are not accessible to you financially or physically, fortunately there are other ways to start to feel the benefits. There are many great books on the subject, although reading and 'being' are by no means the same thing! If you want to be able to 'live more in the moment' explore the simple idea that you can choose where to put your attention, developing this through simple practices such as walking or breathing meditations can bring profound results. Sometimes the realisation that we have a choice over how we respond to our thoughts, that thoughts aren't facts that have to be engaged with, can be transformative. As a taster there are some great free mindful meditations available on the internet, and many smartphone apps, see @01. If you are experiencing difficulties coping with your illness and were considering going to counselling, there are counsellors who practice mindfulness that can support you in this while working with you.

Regular practise of mindfulness retrains the brain to more readily come back to the 'here and now', and grounding techniques using breath and bodily awareness practices can assist you even during flare-ups of your condition. Mindfulness is a way of life rather than something you learn then forget, but the practice is a commitment to wellbeing that is itself healthy. I wish you all the best on your

mindful journey, as you see the world in sharper focus and become better able to face difficulty alongside appreciating the positive, all part of the rich tapestry of life.

Follow me on Twitter [@lizahpool](#) for more mindfulness in action and living well with chronic illness.