

## O N E

### *How Mindfulness Helps with Stress*

*There is a saying in Tibetan: "Tragedy should be utilized as a source of strength." No matter what sort of difficulties, how painful experience is, if we lose our hope, that's our real disaster.*

—DALAI LAMA

AS SARAH began to practice mindfulness exercises, she became more aware of how wild her mind was. All kinds of thoughts, many unconnected to what she was attempting to focus on, entered and exited her mind. She also noticed how negative many of these thoughts were: "I'm useless" and "What's wrong with me?" and "I can't cope with this job and all the other stuff going on." These thoughts kept going around and around in her head. Through mindfulness, she learned to step back from the thoughts in her mind so that they gradually had less of an impact on her feelings of stress.

As her head began to feel a bit clearer, she felt more in control. She found herself less reactive when her son didn't do as he was told. She could see why he was acting out—he hadn't eaten for hours or was tired after school. She felt more compassion for him, and he responded more positively to her calmer tone of voice.

Sarah also felt less tired at work due to an improved ability to focus, and so managed to work more efficiently and leave the office earlier.

In the evenings, when she got home from work, she did a short mindfulness exercise. This helped her shift out of work mode and be more calm and relaxed at home. She learned not to feel so guilty when doing nothing; just sitting down and resting or playing with her son was okay, she realized. In fact, it was essential.

Everyone has a wild mind. We all overreact to the demands of our lives when stretched to our limits. Our world collapses in on itself and we lose empathy for others who are struggling just as we are when stress has us in its grip. It's not our fault—it seems to be the way nature made us. Fortunately, we need not lose hope that things can get better. Sarah's story illustrates that, although mindfulness begins slowly and it's not a quick, smooth ride to an instant stress-free life, if you practice, mindfulness can slowly and steadily soothe your mind and heart, positively nourishing all parts of your life. It's a bit like gentle rain soaking into a land of drought. The rain is mindfulness. The drought is the constant doing of modern living.

To understand how mindfulness can relieve stress, we need to take a closer look at what stress is.

### *What Exactly Is Stress?*

Here's a definition:

Stress is the feeling of being  
under too much pressure.

Pressure can be classified as external (in the world around you) or internal (your thoughts, emotions, and attitudes).

Examples of external pressures include:

- Having to complete work
- Having to do chores and take care of other tasks at home
- Taking care of yourself and those around you
- Having to travel to work or social events
- Managing your own illness or the illness of others
- E-mails, phone calls, and other communications
- Child rearing
- Needing to exercise
- Lacking money

Examples of internal pressures include:

- Negative, judgmental thoughts about yourself
- Negative, judgmental thoughts about others
- Negative thoughts or ideas about the world

- Low self-esteem or low self-compassion
- A tendency toward perfectionism
- Difficult emotions such as depression, anxiety, anger, guilt, or shame that linger for weeks
- Discomfort or pain in your body

You need some external pressure to motivate and excite you. If the pressure is too low for you, you'll feel bored or useless. If the pressure is too high for you, you'll experience high levels of stress. In some ways, your life is a balancing act of finding activities that offer the right level of pressure for you. Everyone's different and at any one time we all require different levels of pressure, whether it's internal or external, to live optimally.

If the pressure is too high for you and lasts for long periods of time, it can cause chronic stress, and that's where the danger lies.

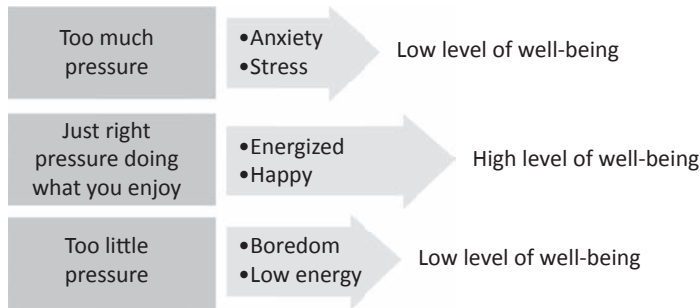
The pressures you experience may not be much higher than you can cope with. But over long periods of time, they can cause problems. For example, imagine I asked you to hold a glass of water out in front of you. If you had to hold the glass of water for a minute, you'd have no problem. You could easily smile at the same time. If you had to hold the glass for 10 minutes, the task becomes trickier, and you may not be smiling so much, but you could manage. But if I asked you to hold that glass of water all day and all night, I'd probably have to call an ambulance by the end of the day.

The glass of water represents the pressure you face. As you can see, the pressure in itself wasn't the issue; the issue was how long you were subjected to it. The duration of the pressure raised its level to the point where it caused stress. This shows how peaks of pressure now and then are not harmful, but long-term pressure can turn to stress.

Having the right level of pressure leads to a life of greater happiness. If you're reading this book, I assume that you're currently under too much pressure rather than too little and will offer you ways to help ease that pressure.

## *What Toll Does Stress Take on Us?*

Stress, or more accurately the stress response, causes changes to take place in your brain and body. These changes can cause various kinds of harm when stress becomes chronic:



- Persistent stress can cause a range of **physical diseases**. Some estimate up to 75% of visits to the physician are stress related. Stress can cause high blood pressure, leading to heart problems including heart attacks. Stress can also cause migraines, back pain, and ulcers. Stress also weakens your immune system, making you susceptible to a range of diseases.
- Chronic stress affects your **mental well-being**. Stress can lead to clinical depression, anxiety, and burnout. Stress also reduces your ability to focus effectively.
- Stress affects your **family life**. When your stress levels are high, you're more likely to snap at your partner or children. If this happens too regularly, the quality of your relationship will diminish. Stress weakens your emotional intelligence, making it difficult to see things from other people's point of view.
- **Addiction** to illicit drugs, alcohol, or nicotine can be linked to chronic stress. You may be using these substances to help relieve the feeling of stress, although the relief is short lived and the addiction raises the overall level of stress.
- **Society as a whole** suffers from stress. The cost to each nation due to reduced efficiency or missing work because of stress runs into hundreds of billions of dollars. And that doesn't touch on the reduced levels of creativity and communication issues due to excessive stress levels.

### *How Can Mindfulness Reduce Stress?*

Stress is a complex subject, and so the path to relieving it is not straightforward either, as Sarah discovered. However, for the sake of simplicity, here are some ways mindfulness helps you with stress.

- You become more **aware of your thoughts**. You can then step back from them and not take them so literally. That way, your stress response is not initiated in the first place.

- **You don't immediately react** to a situation. Instead, you have a moment to pause and then use your “wise mind” to come up with the best solution. Mindfulness helps you do this through the mindful exercises.
- **Mindfulness switches on your “being” mode** of mind, which is associated with relaxation. Your “doing” mode of mind is associated with action and the stress response.
- You are more **aware and sensitive to the needs of your body**. You may notice pains earlier and can then take appropriate action.
- You are **more aware of the emotions of others**. As your emotional intelligence rises, you are less likely to get into conflict.
- **Your level of care and compassion for yourself and others rises**. This compassionate mind soothes you and inhibits your stress response.
- Mindfulness practice **reduces activity in the part of your brain called the amygdala**. The amygdala is central to switching on your stress response, so effectively, your background level of stress is reduced.
- **You are better able to focus**. So you complete your work more efficiently, you have a greater sense of well-being, and this reduces the stress response. You are more likely to get into “the zone” or “flow,” as it's termed in psychology by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi.
- **You can switch your attitude to the stress**. Rather than just seeing the negative consequences of feeling stressed, mindfulness offers you the space to think differently about the stress itself. Observing how the increased pressure helps energize you has a positive effect on your body and mind.

Later in this chapter I describe in detail how mindfulness can benefit you physically, mentally, emotionally, and in your relationships. First, however, it's important to understand the difference between our typical mental state, mindlessness, and mindfulness.

“The mindfulness course made me realize I'd been sleepwalking my whole life. Stress reduction was just one of the many benefits of mindfulness for me.”

### *Mindlessness: The Usual Mode of Mind*

Your normal state of mind during routine activities is probably a state of mindlessness. I don't mean to be accusatory or rude—it's just what the brain defaults to. In the mindless state, you are living a life of unconscious habits. You don't give full attention to every activity you do, but just go through the motions.

Your brain is designed to form habits. This process can help you complete tasks more efficiently. A habit is actually the process of the neurons in

your brain connecting to each other due to regular firing down a particular pathway. You can think of each habit as a computer program. It takes place automatically and quickly and doesn't require any conscious awareness. The habits are formed through a process of repetition. Each time you repeat an activity, you're beginning to create that habitual program. Habits have several benefits:

- The activity can be done unconsciously so you use up less energy in your conscious awareness. You do not need to think “move left leg, move right leg” when walking. It just happens.
- You don't need to waste energy making choices. You wake up and brush your teeth—you don't need to decide to brush your teeth today.
- Habitual activities can be done much more quickly. Doing something new, like playing the piano, is far more difficult and slow at the beginning.
- You feel more relaxed. You're not trying hard to engage in the habit—it happens by itself. If you have a habit of eating an apple a day, you don't need to try hard to force yourself to eat the healthy fruit.
- You can be more effective in your activity. When you first try to juggle, it's difficult and you keep dropping the balls. Once it's an automatic action, you can hop on one leg and tell a joke at the same time.

However, there are several disadvantages of habits too:

- As habits are normally unconscious, you're not awake to the experience. If you're playing with your child habitually, you miss the special and precious moment of being together. The experience can't be savored if habitual.
- You lose choice. How can you make a choice if you're acting automatically and habitually? If you've always traveled from San Francisco to Chicago by plane, you book the ticket automatically. You don't consider a train journey or a road trip with friends.
- When your thoughts, emotions, and attitudes are both habitual and negative, you're much more likely to experience stress. Persistent unmindful, negative thinking turns on your stress response.

Habitual negative thoughts about yourself, others,  
and the world are at the root of a lot of stress.

Mindfulness helps you undo those unhelpful habits

and to rewire your brain to generate greater happiness  
and less chronic stress.

### PRACTICE: Two-Minute Mindfulness Exercise

*Audio track 1: 2 minutes.*

Try this exercise right now.

1. Set a timer for 2 minutes.
2. Begin by taking a deep, slow breath in and out.
3. Now pay attention to the **feeling** of your breathing just breathe naturally. Each time you notice your mind drift to other thoughts, gently bring your attention back to your breath.
4. After 2 minutes, you can stop.

### Reflection

Give yourself a few moments to reflect on the following questions. If you feel like writing them down, you can enter your answers in your smart-phone or tablet (if you have one). Once you start the 8-week program, you'll be encouraged to acquire a journal or start recording these reflections electronically in one place, so you can get a jump on the journaling now if you like.

1. What did you notice?
2. Were you able to focus your attention on your breathing?
3. Where else did your attention wander to?
4. How did you feel at the end of the exercise?
5. Was it easy or difficult?

**Remember:** Your mind will drift to other thoughts. This is normal. It doesn't mean you're doing anything wrong. In fact, if you noticed that your mind drifted, it means you're doing the exercise correctly.

Now repeat the experiment, but this time try sitting or standing up straight and close your eyes if they were open the first time. Then reconsider the questions above. Which of the two exercises was it easier to focus in?

## *Understanding Mindfulness*

Mindfulness is the opposite of habitual, automatic living. Mindfulness teaches you to live more consciously. You still have your habits, because that is the nature of the brain, but you notice them more and gain greater choice in your life.

Here's my definition of mindfulness, which brings together the essence of the many different definitions that mindful teachers have shared:

Mindfulness means intentionally paying attention  
to your present-moment experience  
with mindful attitudes such as acceptance, curiosity,  
self-compassion, and openness.

Let's break this definition down to make better sense of its meaning.

### **INTENTIONALLY**

Mindfulness isn't usually an automatic process. You don't often find yourself being mindful. Mindfulness is a process that requires a decision; you need to choose to be mindful. And then you exert a certain kind of effort, at least initially. Once you begin to get into the flow of mindful awareness, your level of effort may decrease, but at least initially, there is a purposeful decision to pay attention.

Interestingly, you're paying attention to something almost all the time. The question is what you're paying attention to. While reading this book, your mind may be on the television on in the background. Or thinking about what's going to happen at work today. Or replaying what happened yesterday. This is passive attention. Passive attention is involuntary. Mindfulness is more than just paying attention passively to wherever your attention goes.

Mindfulness is an active rather than passive attention. An active, or purposeful, attention requires choice and a certain degree of effort. We get into intention in more detail later in this chapter.

### **PAYING ATTENTION**

You can think of attention as a focused awareness. The word attention comes from the Latin *attendere*, meaning literally "to stretch toward." When you pay attention to a lecture, you're stretching your awareness toward the speaker's voice.



Attention is about taking notice—being aware of what’s happening while it’s happening. We use our senses to pay attention to external experiences: sights, sounds, smells, tastes, touch. You can pay attention to, for example, the sight of this book, the sound of a baby crying in the distance, the smell of oil from a deep fryer in a fast-food restaurant, the taste of your morning orange juice, and the sensation of the weight of your body on your chair, or tension in your shoulders. When you pay attention to these experiences purposefully, you’re being mindful.

But you’re not restricted to your outer senses in mindfulness. Consciously focusing on your internal experiences such as your thoughts and emotions without being swept away by them, as best you can, is mindfulness. You can pay attention to thoughts like “I can’t be bothered to do this job” or “Why is that woman shouting?” or emotions like boredom, excitement, or frustration. To notice these internal experiences rather than just **unconsciously having** them, is mindfulness. That little sense of separation between you and your thoughts or emotions is key.

You may think, “So what? Okay, so I’m not 100% aware all the time. I daydream. I think about other stuff. What’s wrong with that?” Well, here’s a typical example of an experience I had last week. Imagine you were on this business trip: You wake up ready to get a flight back home from a business trip, from Chicago to London. You check the weather and discover the forecast is not good. Twelve inches of snow is predicted. The report says lots of flights will either be delayed or canceled. You think, “Oh no! My flight’s gonna be canceled. I was really looking forward to getting back home and spending some time with the kids before going back to work. Why does this always happen to me? It’s so annoying. Will I be able to get a hotel for an extra night? This airline always gives poor service when these things happen.” You begin to feel tense and stressed.

Now consider an alternative scenario: You wake up, ready to get a flight back home from a business trip, from Chicago to London. You check the weather and discover the forecast is not good. Twelve inches of snow is predicted. The report says lots of flights will either be delayed or canceled. You think, “Oh no, my flight’s gonna be canceled.” Then you actually notice that you’ve had that particular thought. You recognize it as a prediction, not a fact. You then check your flight online and discover that it is actually flying and, with a bit of luck, you may take off on time. As you spend the morning in a coffee shop, you enjoy the beauty of the snow while sipping your cup of tea. You know that how much or little you worry will make no difference.

This is one example of mindfulness in action. By being aware of your thoughts, you’re able to take action rather than allow your mind to run away with itself. The example shows the following key principle:

Being unmindful actually causes you to suffer, often more than you think.

### IN THE PRESENT MOMENT

Most young children have their attention drawn to the present moment. They are intensely curious. Children notice the sound of the plane, the bird in the tree, and the taste of the grapes. As they grow up, their memory is filled with experiences of the past, and they are able to project into the future. With this unique human ability, as we grow up, we tend to be less connected with the present moment.

Your mind seems to naturally replay past incidents and worry about the future. While reading this, you may find yourself thinking about that comment your friend made: Was she being rude?

Just as a swinging pendulum moves from left to right, spending little time in the middle, so your mind spends a lot of time in the past and future. In fact, research in 2010 by Killingsworth and Gilbert at Harvard University suggested the typical human brain spends about 50% of its time thinking about the past and future and only 50% in the here and now, the present moment.

Why is present-moment living important? The great leader Gandhi once said: "The future depends on what we do in the present moment." If your attention is excessively in the past and future, you can't perform effectively in the here and now, the present moment. But tomorrow never comes; there is only today. What you do today and how you focus now matters.

The following example illustrates this point. I was chatting with one of my clients, Katie, the other day. She told me that before she did a mindfulness course she was constantly worrying about her children and their future. Was she a good mother? Was she bringing up her children well, using the right parenting approach? She read websites and books, and they all seemed to give different advice. She felt lost and confused and very tired. After practicing mindfulness, Katie decided to let all those thoughts go and be present with her child. She gave her little boy her full attention, and her time with him felt so much more special. Her worrying receded, and she felt she was a much better mother when she was living in the present moment rather than worrying about what was right and wrong all the time.

Without conscious effort, your mind wanders to thoughts about the past or the future. And the thoughts about the past can easily end up being about negative interactions. You think about the argument you had with your brother for the tenth time or consider all the different reasons your new girlfriend isn't calling you.

Of course, there's nothing wrong with thinking. In fact, thinking is

essential for survival as a human being in the modern age. The problem is the constant worrying that leads to unhappiness. Mindfulness helps to bring some balance back from relentless thinking, worrying, and planning.

### **MINDFUL ATTITUDES OF ACCEPTANCE, CURIOSITY, SELF-COMPASSION, AND OPENNESS**

Mindfulness is more than just paying attention. It's also about paying attention with the right attitude. If your attention is infused with negativity, self-criticism, and judgment, it's not likely to be beneficial. You need to bring certain attitudes, what I call mindful attitudes, so that you build your attention on a positive foundation. All these attitudes don't have to be cultivated perfectly and don't need to be kept in your conscious awareness all the time. They are the flavoring in the soup of mindful awareness that you're cooking. Any one of them is more than satisfactory in a mindfulness exercise that you do. You'll learn a lot more about each of these attitudes as you read through this book.

#### **Tales of Wisdom: The Anger-Eating Monster**

Once upon a time, there was a king who lived in a beautiful palace. The king had to go away for a while, and while he was away, a monster approached the gates of the palace. The monster was so ugly and smelly, and his words so disgusting, that the guards froze in shock. He passed the guards and sat on the king's throne. The guards soon came to their senses, went in, and shouted at the monster, demanding that he get off the throne. With each foul word they used, the monster grew more smelly, ugly, and disgusting. The guards got even angrier—they began to brandish their swords and use violence to remove the monster. But the monster just grew bigger and bigger, eventually taking up the whole room. He grew more smelly, ugly, and disgusting than ever. He was smellier than the restrooms in the roughest bar on a drunken Saturday night.

Eventually the king returned. He was wise and kind and saw what was happening in the confrontation. He knew what to do. He smiled and said "Welcome to my palace!" to the monster. He then asked the monster if anyone had offered him a cup of coffee. The monster began to grow smaller as he sipped the drink. The king offered him some take-out pizza and fries. The guards immediately called for pizza. The monster continued to shrink with the king's kind gestures. The king then offered the monster a full body massage, and as the guards helped with the relaxing massage,

the monster became tiny. With a final act of kindness to the monster, he just disappeared.

The source of your stress may be an anger-eating monster. Do you think your anger is making your anger-eating monster bigger? With some stressful circumstances, the more negative thoughts, words, or actions you have, the more difficult the situation becomes. Perhaps this story may help you open your heart to your challenge and see the value of a more friendly approach? Just being friendly toward yourself may be what's required.

## *The Physical Benefits of Mindfulness*

Although mindfulness is often referred to as a form of mind training, the approach has many physical benefits. This is often because mindfulness reduces excessive stress, and stress is associated with many physical ailments.

Here are some of the key positive effects of practicing mindfulness exercises and meditations on a regular basis.

### **MORE RELAXED MUSCLES**

When you become stressed, your muscles tighten up. There's a reason for this. Stress engages your body's fight-or-flight response. Your muscles are preparing to work hard to enable you to run away or fight. Mindfulness helps you notice the tension in your body as one sign that your stress levels are rising. With this awareness you can begin taking action to reduce the stress. In addition, the very awareness of the tension often reduces it.

I remember working with a woman who suffered from what she called chronic tension. Her whole body was so tense that moving was painful and sometimes impossible. Traditional relaxation exercises didn't seem to help her. But by learning mindfulness she learned to become aware of that physical tension without trying to change it. She learned to be a little less judgmental and a little more accepting of the sensations. This led to an easing and reduction in that tension and a reduction in pain.

### **A HEALTHIER HEART**

When you're stressed, your heart beats faster and your blood pressure rises to prepare you to run or fight. Your body reacts as if you're under attack. Heart disease is the number-one cause of death in Americans each year, and anxiety is one of the contributing factors. Initial indications showed that for a group

suffering from heart disease, mindfulness helped. The group had a reduction in anxiety, improved ability to manage emotions, and a better style of coping with stress and took more effective control of their health.

### **AN IMPROVED RELATIONSHIP WITH FOOD**

Do you have trouble digesting your food? Another problem with the stress response is your digestive system stops working effectively. Your body is reacting as if it's about to be eaten by a tiger. If you're going to end up as someone else's lunch, there's no point wasting your energy digesting your own breakfast. Lowering stress through efforts like mindfulness can ease digestive distress. Applying mindfulness specifically to eating also prepares your body to digest: being more conscious as you eat, you taste your food and avoid multitasking, and your brain sends the appropriate messages to your digestive system to begin its work. This is mindful eating. Studies have shown mindful eating can reduce bingeing and overeating, can help you lose weight, can reduce chronic conditions like anorexia and bulimia, and help with the symptoms of Type 2 diabetes.

### **A LONGER LIFE—THROUGH PROTECTION OF YOUR DNA**

This is an incredible finding. Just as the ends of shoelaces have a tip to protect them from fraying, so the chromosomes in your cells have a cap on them to stop them from fraying. These protective caps are called telomeres. Before it was thought that the wearing out of these caps was inevitable, resulted in cells dying, eventually leading to death of the cell due to "old age." But in 2009, Dr. Elizabeth Blackburn won the Nobel Prize for discovering that a substance in the body called telomerase protects the telomeres. More telomerase would mean a longer life. And here comes the good news: mindfulness increases the amount of telomerase. This helps to effectively reduce or perhaps reverse the aging of your cells. So be mindful and look young and vibrant!

### **BETTER IMMUNE FUNCTION**

One other key function that gets almost shut down when you're stressed is your immune system. Your immune system is a long-term protective system but gets overridden by the stress response, which is your short-term survival mechanism. If you're chronically stressed, you're much more likely to get sick. Research by Professor Richard Davidson from the University of Wisconsin and colleagues found that, following an 8-week mindfulness course, participants produced more antibodies to fight flu compared with those who hadn't gone through the mindfulness course. Other research has shown mindful

practitioners miss fewer days of work due to respiratory infections and have milder symptoms for a shorter time.

A 2009 study of 48 people who tested HIV positive showed mindfulness may be very beneficial. The group that did an 8-week meditation course had no reduction in the number of white blood cells—a key part of the immune system. However, the nonmeditating group's level of white blood cells went down.

### **PAIN RELIEF—MORE THAN MORPHINE**

A small study published in *Journal of Neuroscience* in 2011 found mindfulness reduced pain intensity by 40%. That's even more effective than morphine! The research found this pain relief seemed to be due to a different way your brain works after becoming more mindful. The researchers trained the participants in mindfulness for 1 hour and then asked them to practice mindfulness while they heated a small part of their skin to 120°F for 5 minutes—a painful experience for most people! Several other studies have found that mindfulness helped people manage not only acute pain but also chronic pain.

### **IMPROVED SLEEP**

I find this is one of the first benefits that people mention when they begin practicing mindfulness, and there's research to back up their claims. Research from the University of Utah found mindfulness helped people regulate their emotions during the day and experience “lower activation” at bedtime, which may boost the quality of sleep.

Considering that you spend about a third of your life asleep, practicing mindfulness just to sleep better makes sense, but it also can help reduce stress. Mindfulness reduces your stress and thereby improves your sleep. The improvement in sleep in turn makes you feel even less stressed. The mindfulness begins a positive feedback loop.

## *Benefits for Your Brain and Mind*

These are the benefits of mindfulness that most people are familiar with, particularly the way mindfulness improves focus and helps to calm your mind. But there's more to mindfulness than that! Here's what the research shows.

### **A CLEARER MIND**

Several studies have shown that mindfulness practice reduces rumination or worrying. Research in 2009 published in the *Journal of Science and Healing*

found participants of an 8-week MBSR course had greater levels of well-being and reduced rumination. In my experience, one of the beneficial side effects is creativity. When I practice mindfulness, I often end up having ideas that help in my daily work or home life. The title for this very book came up for me in a meditation while attending a retreat.

### A CALMER MIND

Many studies have proven the stress reduction effects of mindfulness. That's obviously what this book is all about. Exactly why mindfulness reduces stress is actually unknown. One fascinating study, published in 2010 in the journal *Emotion*, explored the subject through the use of film. Two groups were asked to watch a sad movie. One group had completed an MBSR course, and the other had not. Brain scans reveal that the meditators had less brain activity compared to the nonmeditators, and the brain activity was distinctly different compared to the brain activity before doing the mindfulness training. This seems to suggest that mindfulness enables emotions to be processed differently in the brain and may be one way stress is reduced through mindfulness practice.

### BETTER MEMORY

In particular, mindfulness boosts a type of memory that we all have called *working memory*. Think of your working memory as being like a little whiteboard. You use the whiteboard to make notes about what people are saying to you and what you need to do at the moment. A weak working memory is like having a very small whiteboard. You easily forget what you're doing and get distracted by other things. A larger whiteboard means you can remember what you're doing and remain less distracted by other people or thoughts. Stress has been shown to reduce working memory capacity, and mindfulness has been shown to increase working memory capacity. So mindfulness makes your little whiteboard a bit bigger. Improved working memory is associated with improved learning ability, focus, and skill in regulating emotions.

### IMPROVED FOCUS

As you may have guessed, mindfulness improves your ability to focus. In fact, it improves focus a lot. Research in 2009 at Liverpool John Moores University found mindfulness meditators perform significantly better than nonmeditators in all measures of attention. When you focus better, you are more likely to get into a "flow" state of mind, an absorbed mental mode associated with high levels of well-being—the opposite of excessive stress. Improved focus also



leads to a greater sense of achievement and greater efficiency, so more time for friends and family. You feel more in control rather than out of control.

## *Emotional Benefits*

### **HAPPINESS!**

Call it happiness, well-being, or flow—mindfulness helps to raise it. The sense that you are happy is linked to so many other benefits, including improved relationships, longer life, and better performance and outcomes at work. Plus, being happy feels good. The effect of mindfulness on happiness was found in research published in the *Journal of Behavioral Medicine* in 2003. The scientists found higher levels of well-being for those who participated in the MBSR course. Those who did more meditation and yoga practice at home had higher levels of mindfulness and well-being. The previously mentioned research by Killingsworth and Gilbert also found that people whose minds wandered less were happier.

### **PROTECTION AGAINST DEPRESSION**

One of the problems with chronic stress is the emergence of depression. The link between stress and depression is complex, but there's certainly a link. Chronic stress changes the hormones in your bloodstream, making depression more likely. And when you're under too much pressure, you're less likely to socialize, eat healthily, or exercise—you can end up not looking after yourself. According to the World Health Organization, more than 350 million people suffer from depression and it's the leading cause of disability worldwide. Here in the United Kingdom, mindfulness is used to treat recurring clinical depression by the National Health Service (NHS). A group course in mindfulness called mindfulness-based cognitive therapy, which is similar in many ways to the course in this book, has been found to be 50% more effective than the usual treatments. Mindfulness helps you stop fighting the feeling of sadness. Instead you learn to accept the feeling, notice the associated thoughts and physical sensations, with compassion toward yourself. This shift helps to prevent sadness from being prolonged and intensified and becoming depression.

### **REDUCTION IN LONELINESS**

One of the key factors that raises stress in older adults is loneliness. Humans are social beings, and without social contact feelings of loneliness can become overwhelming. Programs designed to increase social contact in older adults



have so far been unsuccessful. Recent research at Carnegie Mellon University has found mindfulness meditation helped to reduce loneliness. Interestingly, they also found a reduction in the expression of a gene associated with inflammation. So mindfulness was affecting their genes. Inflammation is associated with cancer, cardiovascular diseases, and neurodegenerative diseases, so a reduction in this gene expression is a very promising finding too.

### LESS ANXIETY

Anxiety is the feeling of fear, tension, or worry often caused by a stressful event. Stress isn't a diagnosable mental disorder, but anxiety can be. An anxiety disorder develops when your fight-or-flight system is switched on most of the time and you feel fear to an extent that it affects your everyday ability to function. In the past, treatment involved trying to change thoughts. But with mindfulness, the idea is to change your *relationship* to thoughts and move from avoiding feelings to approaching them. In 2012, researchers at the University of Bergen in Norway looked at 19 different studies and found mindfulness-based approaches to offer robust and substantial reductions in anxiety.

### LOWER ANGER LEVELS

Anger arises when things are not going the way you want them to. Sometimes that anger is unnecessary and unhelpful. Frequent anger can be very destructive to your work and home life, increasing your stress. When you're feeling stressed, you're much more likely to get angry too. It's been found that anger is fueled by "hot thoughts"—negative, aggressive thinking patterns. Mindfulness helps you notice and reduce unhelpful thinking patterns and so can reduce your feelings of anger when appropriate. This research was published in the journal *Aggressive Behavior* back in 2010.

## *Relationship Benefits*

Relationships matter—a lot. Human relationships have been shown in study after study to be the number-one factor that increases happiness. People with lots of good-quality relationships, and that includes friends or family members, are likely to have a higher resilience toward stress. This is because when difficulties arise in their lives, they have someone to talk to.

Mindfulness gives you a chance to increase the quality of your relationships with your friends, family, and colleagues via the mechanisms described below. And by increasing the quality of those relationships, you increase your

resilience to stress—and that of the other people in your life, because you give them someone to talk to as well!

### A PRESENT-MOMENT AWARENESS

When others are talking to you, how present are you? You may be with them physically, but are you with them mentally and emotionally?

I remember a manager I once had who was rarely focused when I spoke to him. At work parties, he would be looking over my shoulder. In meetings, he wouldn't acknowledge what I said to him. And he seemed to have his favorites on the team and others whom he didn't seem to care much about. This made him rather unpopular in the office, and his team felt unmotivated and frustrated as a result.

Being more present means you listen more effectively and the other person feels heard. And being heard is what others really want. You strengthen the relationship each time you are present.

### MAKING CONSCIOUS CHOICES IN THE HEAT OF THE MOMENT

"Autopilot is the big enemy of relationships," according to Marsha Lucas, author of *Rewire Your Brain for Love*. The way we behave in relationships often flows from the way our brain was wired in early childhood. If you allow yourself to behave automatically in your relationships, you're likely to repeat unhelpful patterns. Mindfulness rewires your brain—including parts of the brain responsible for emotional regulation and self-awareness. Through this rewiring, you're less likely to react in knee-jerk fashion when faced with a difficult emotion. By being mindful, you can manage your emotions in the heat of the moment, as your brain would be better wired to manage that. Imagine the amount of stress that can be reduced by being less reactive and to make a more controlled choice of words and action when upset by a partner, family member, or colleague.

### KINDNESS

Bringing a sense of kindness, compassion, or friendliness to your dealings with others is bound to increase the quality of your relationship. This will make you and the other person feel happier and more relaxed, reducing your levels of stress too. However, you need to balance kindness toward others with kindness toward yourself.

Last week a friend and colleague asked me to give a lecture on using mindfulness to overcome depression. Mindfulness is a wonderful, drug-free way of managing depression, and I was delighted to share my passion for this

boon. However, I already had several other deadlines to meet that week. I had to be kind to myself on this occasion and say no to my friend. It wasn't easy. I don't like to say no to opportunities to speak about mindfulness, but if I didn't say no, I'd be denying myself rest. And by resting I was giving myself time to reduce my own stress, thereby preparing to offer a better service to others in the future.

### Reflection

Consider your own life. Think about the last three things you said yes to. Were you being kind to yourself or to others? Then think about the last three things you said no to. Were you being kind to yourself or others? Record your answers in a print or electronic journal if you like.

Ideally, you want to have a balance. If you're always giving and too kind to others to the detriment of your own stress levels, think about saying no more often. And if you always look out for yourself and rarely care for others, consider reaching out and performing an act of kindness for someone else.

### BEING NONJUDGMENTAL

Letting go of judgment is a great way to improve your relationships and reduce your stress. The key, if you do need to judge, is to judge the *action* and not the person. I like to think of the essence of all humans as pure and complete—just as they were as babies. But due to misunderstandings, past experiences, brain chemicals, or other influences, the other person doesn't always behave reasonably or compassionately.

Here's an example of how I've tried to apply this. I had a friendship for a couple of years that didn't end well. Mike and I used to go to the movies or theater together, meet up every week, share ideas, and generally support each other. Mike and I were good friends. Then one day, out of the blue, he accused me of not being a friend. He claimed I had ignored him at a party. Described how I had offered a new project to another friend before I offered it to him. He said he wanted to get things out in the open rather than hold them in. This was all out of the blue. A bit shocked, I accepted the criticisms and apologized. I had no idea he was having these feelings. Yet I still never heard from him again. No more e-mails, phone calls, or texts. He didn't reply to anything. At first I felt sad and confused. Then I felt frustrated that he would do this to me. Eventually, however, I accepted the situation. The way I

did this was by letting go of my judgment of him and also applying this personal principle of mine:

People are always doing the best they can, with the level  
of understanding and motivation they have,  
at any given moment.

There was no point in my judging Mike as wrong or bad. He did what he did because of what he thought of me. He didn't want to discuss it further. By letting go of my judgment of him, I could relax and release the stress I had when I thought of him. I forgive him, because *he did what he thought was right*. That's understandable. That doesn't mean what he did was right or fair or even wise—but he did what he did for a reason. I can now feel grateful that he gave me the opportunity to practice forgiveness and wish him a more fulfilling experience with his other friendships.

### Reflection

Is there someone in your life whom you feel you should stop judging? Is there someone causing you stress just as you think about him or her? Would it be helpful if you forgave the person but not the action? Could you consider appreciating the chance they've given you to practice the act of forgiveness?

Write your thoughts in your smartphone, tablet, or journal if you like. This is not easy and you may disagree with this approach to offenses you've suffered. But it's certainly worth reflecting on.

## *Mindfulness Is Bigger Than Meditation*

There are only two ways to become more mindful:

1. Mindfulness meditation
2. Everyday mindfulness

Mindfulness meditation, a particular type of meditation, is where you make time to make your brain more mindful. Mindfulness meditation can be done for less than 5 minutes all the way up to about 45 minutes. The

meditation involves practicing a particular technique, such as focusing on your breath, body, or sounds.

Mindfulness meditation creates positive changes in your brain. It actually rewires your brain so that you're more happy, focused, clear-headed, and open—in other words, more mindful! Meditation is the most powerful way to enhance your brain's ability to be mindful.

Yoga, tai chi, or other mind–body disciplines that are done with a full mindful awareness can also be classified as a mindfulness meditation.

**"I'm not the kind of person that likes to sit down and meditate. The fact that mindfulness can be practiced while I'm walking, cooking, or gardening makes it so portable and accessible for me."**

Everyday mindfulness involves living in a mindful way. Each time you do an activity, if you *intentionally* give the process your full attention with mindful attitudes like curiosity and openness (this can also be called detachment or stepping back), you also enhance your brain's mindfulness.

Everyday mindfulness can be practiced at any time in your daily life. You can do mindful eating, mindful walking, and even simply mindful breathing while you're waiting in line somewhere. These types of everyday mindfulness are described in full throughout the 8-week program.

This is why mindfulness is bigger than meditation. Meditation can be practiced only at particular times in the day, when you make time to meditate. But you have the choice to be mindful at any moment in the day by giving full attention to whatever you're engaged in. Ready to discover what's so special about the 8-week mindfulness course in this book?